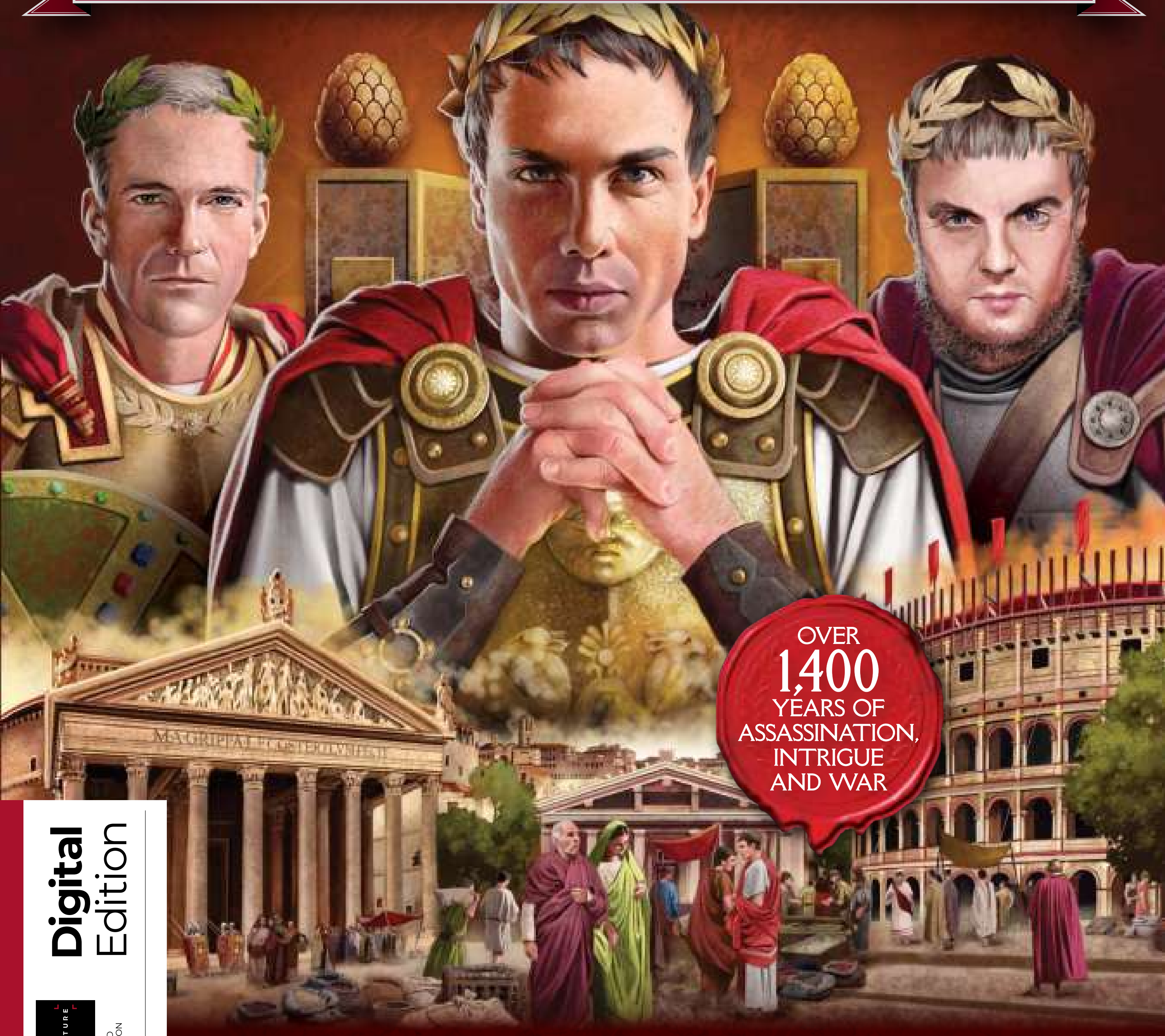
NEW from ALL ABOUT HISTORY

ROMAN EMPERORS

MEET THE RULERS OF EUROPE'S MOST FAMOUS EMPIRE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OVER 1,400 YEARS OF ASSASSINATION, INTRIGUE AND WAR

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THIRD EDITION

AUGUSTUS • NERO • COMMODUS • CONSTANTINE

WELCOME TO

ROMAN EMPERORS

The fighting had stopped. Years of civil war, death and betrayal had ended, and one man emerged victorious from the fray. The adopted son of the once-great Julius Caesar was bestowed the title of Augustus by the Senate, and he ushered in a new era of rule: the Roman Empire.

In All About History Roman Emperors, it's time to meet the people who were charged with leading one of the greatest civilisations of the ancient world. Uncover the depraved reigns of Caligula and Nero, go on a Christian crusade with Constantine, and meet the rulers of the East who kept the Roman Empire alive for over 1,000 years. So untangle the family trees, prepare for brutual assassinations and bloody coups, and decide for yourself who really was the greatest emperor of Ancient Rome.

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ROMAN EMPERORS

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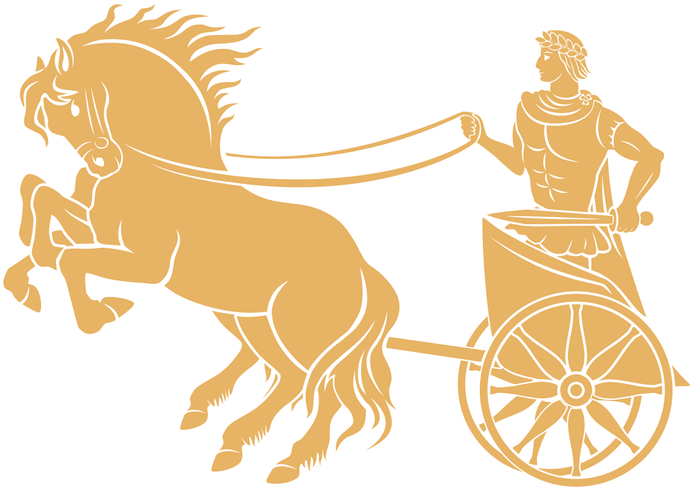
Julius Caesar, pictured here, became the archetype for the Roman emperor to come (both in power and eventual fate)



THE DYNASTIES OF THE ROMAN EMPIRE

From its earliest days in the republic to the final dark days of the empire, the dynasties of Rome shaped the nation and its fate

For four centuries of its existence, Rome was ruled by nine incredibly powerful dynasties and it was under their rule that the nation rose to the height of its power and eventually saw it fall into the hands of Eastern masters. The first of these eras, the Principate, was the first to emerge after the end of the Republic where Rome expanded with military might into one of the most powerful nations of the world. The Principate began with the formation of the position of emperor, where the democratic structure of the republic was cast aside and the power of the entire realm was passed into the hands of a single man.

The first of those men, Augustus, was mindful of the dangers of plunging Rome into a political world that the people did not recognise so the Senate was preserved, but the Senate ultimately answered to the seat of the emperor. It was all an illusion, but it was a system that was set in place and lasted for the 300 years of the Principate.

Following the Crisis of the Third Century, the political strata of Rome changed with more power consolidated into the position of emperor. This was the beginning of the Dominate era, where the emperors enacted the personal control over the realm we most closely associate with the imperial throne. It was also a time of political uncertainty and upheaval, with brief experiments in joint rule (in a paltry imitation of the republican days) and an eventual split in the empire into a disparate East and West that eventually sealed the fate of Rome, and with it the Roman Empire.

ROMAN EMPERORS

THE JULIO-CLAUDIAN DYNASTY

27 BCE - 68 CE

The first five emperors of Rome began with Augustus, and it was through him that the Principate model of governance (where both Senate and emperor exist, but the Senate ultimately answers to the most powerful man in the realm). Many of these men had no natural heirs so most used adoption to select their eventual successor and continue the dynasty. From Augustus to Nero, it was a divisive time for the Romans. Political infighting and favouritism saw the persecution of certain families considered rivals to the Julio-Claudians with even the senate itself attempting to regain power at one point. Rome even burned in 64 CE.

AUGUSTUS
27 BCE - 14 CE

TIBERIUS
14-27 CE

YEAR OF THE FOUR EMPERORS

68-69 CE

Following Nero's suicide, Rome is plunged into civil war as rival families aim to install their own candidates as emperor. Before the rise of the Flavians, three men rule: Galba, Otho and Vitellius.

Rome was now plunged into a year of civil war where four men would rise to the title of emperor - Galba, Otho, Vitellius and Vespasian.

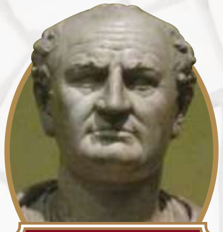
GALBA
68-69 CE

When Vespasian eventually becomes emperor, he helps bring the civil unrest to a close.

FLAVIAN DYNASTY

69-96 CE

The Flavian dynasty seized power during the civil war, and while the dynasty's reign was relatively short, the family did make some big changes. The first Flavian emperor Vespasian's new taxes helped improve finances, while the addition of silver to Roman coins bettered the economy.



VESPASIAN
69-79 CE

TITUS
79-81 CE

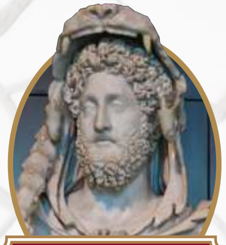
Vespasian's second son (and the third Flavian emperor) Domitian was assassinated in 96 CE, and long-time supporter Nerva took his place.

THE NERVA-ANTONINE DYNASTY

96-192 CE

The seven emperors of the Nerva-Antonine dynasty brought about something of a more peaceful and successful era for Rome. It was a time of healing between emperor, military and people; and it saw some of the most well-liked emperors take the position over a near century of rule. The first three - Nerva, Trajan and Hadrian - renewed the policy of adoption in order to secure the right heir. While most of the successive emperors were not father and son, many were related by blood so family ties were secured. This continued with the Antonines - Antoninus Pius, Marcus Aurelius, Lucius Verus and Commodus. Some of them even ruled together for a time.

MARCUS AURELIUS
161-180 CE



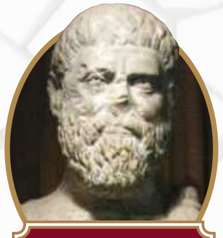
COMMODUS
177-192 CE

Rome yet again found itself in a power struggle between a number of influential figures, and a year of murder and deceit would follow.

YEAR OF THE FIVE EMPERORS

193 CE

Following Commodus' assassination, his Praetorian Guard would eventually go on to murder his successor, Pertinax, within three months. Didius Julianus succeeded him, but was executed by Septimius Severus. Severus would co-rule while fighting a civil war against another claimant.



PERTINAX
193 CE

SEPTIMIUS SEVERUS
193-211 CE

Severus co-rules with Clodius Albinus, who eventually turns on and defeats in order to take full control of the empire.

SEVERAN DYNASTY

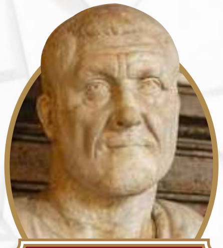
193-235 CE

The final dynasty of Principate did see the end of the civil war, but it also saw the empire's seat of power shaken by political infighting and turmoil that would foreshadow the crisis to come.

ELAGABALUS
218-222 CE

SEVERUS ALEXANDER
222-235 CE

Severus Alexander was the last of the line, and while he started off popular, he soon became a figure of derision as a series of military faux pas left him with his own men's swords in his back.



MAXIMUS I
235-238 CE

CRISIS OF THE THIRD CENTURY

235-284 CE

With the final emperor of the Principate dead in Severus Alexander, and murdered by his generals at that, Rome and the empire were plunged into its most bloody internal conflict yet. The Crisis of the Third Century, or the Imperial Crisis, raged for almost half a century and saw 26 individual men recognised by the senate as Caesar (thus making them official emperors). The conflict was so severe it saw the empire become divided into three warring states: the Palmyrene Empire (including Roman Egypt and Roman Syria), the Gallic Empire (which consisted of Gaul and Britannia) and the remaining Roman Empire in between.

No one emperor had true control in this period until Aurelian, who united all three empires and effectively ended the Crisis of the Third Century.

AURELIAN
270-275 CE

CONSTANTIUS CHLORUS
293-306 CE

THE TETRARCHY

284-313 CE

The end of the Crisis saw a new style of rule where power was divided equally among four men – Diocletian, Galerius, Maximian and Constantius Chlorus. Each one ruled a different section of the empire.

DIOCLETIAN
284-305 CE

After 20 years of rule, Diocletian and Maximian abdicate and two more men are made co-caesars. This eventually breaks down, civil war ensues and Chlorus' son, Constantine emerges the victor.

CONSTANTINE THE GREAT
306-337 CE

THE CONSTANTINIAN DYNASTY

306-363 CE

The Constantian dynasty saw the first true beginning of the Dominate or 'despot' era, where the concept of a singular powerful rule was dropped and a great deal more power consolidated in the position of emperor, and a series of military and religious upheavals that changed the realm forever. The Constantine line (sometimes known as the Neo-Flavian line, due to each member carrying that name, too) actually began with Constantius Chlorus during the Tetrarchy, but it wouldn't be until the ascension of his son Constantine the Great when Rome (still divided into an Eastern and Western realm) was united.

LICINIUS I
308-324 CE

The Constantinian line lasts until 364 CE when Jovian, the last of the emperors of that line, dies of natural causes. The army names his replacement.

VALENTINIAN I
364-375 CE

THE VALENTINIAN DYNASTY

364-392 CE

The Valentinian dynasty saw a Tetrarchy-esque rule as Rome was purposely divided into Eastern and Western sections to be ruled by a pair of co-rulers. The decision would fragment the Empire forever.

VALENTINIAN II
375-392 CE

The details surrounding the death of the final of the four Valentinian rulers, Valentinian II, remains a mystery, but many have theorised he was assassinated or committed suicide.

THE THEODOSIAN DYNASTY

379-457 CE

One of the last families to rule the empire in its twilight years, one which initially ruled in the Eastern Roman Empire, but also one that briefly reunited the two sections under one family in 394 CE.

HONORIUS
395-423 CE

The Theodosian dynasty was the last Western family to rule the Eastern Roman Empire. From then on, the realm was ruled by the Byzantines.

ANTHEMIUS
467-472 CE

THE LAST EMPERORS OF THE WESTERN ROMAN EMPIRE

457-518 CE

As the Eastern Roman Empire (an entity that, in one form or another, endured until the 15th century under Eastern rulers) fell into Byzantine hands, the Western Roman Empire became a hodge podge of self-proclaimed emperors and assassinations. It was the great dream of Rome at its worst, the very fabric of Roman society coming apart at the seams as rich and powerful men with no mind to rule sought the hollow shell of Caesarhood. The Western Roman Empire didn't go out with a blaze of glory, but petered out into nothing as the last of its claimants died or were murdered.

JULIUS NEPOS
474-475 CE

We can see this as the effective end of the Western Roman Empire.

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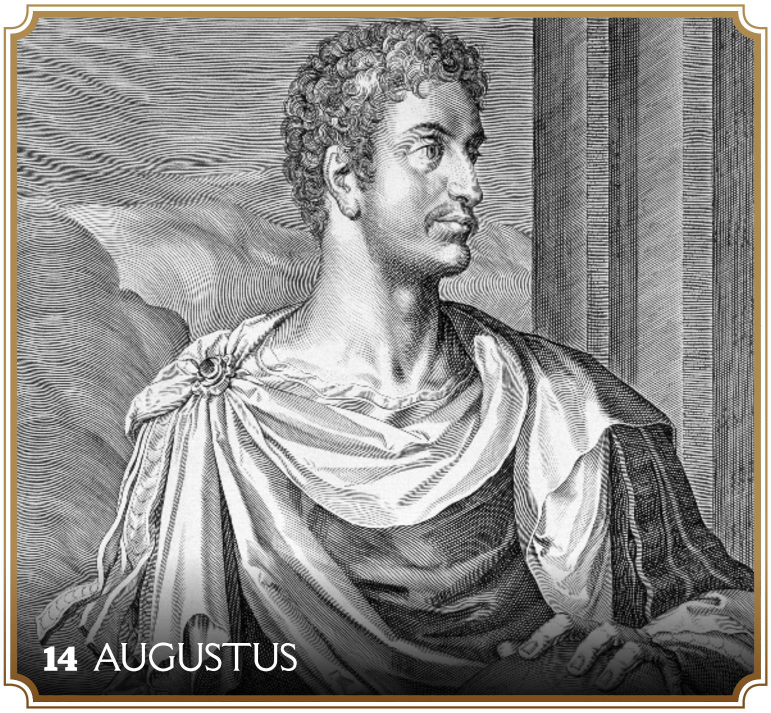
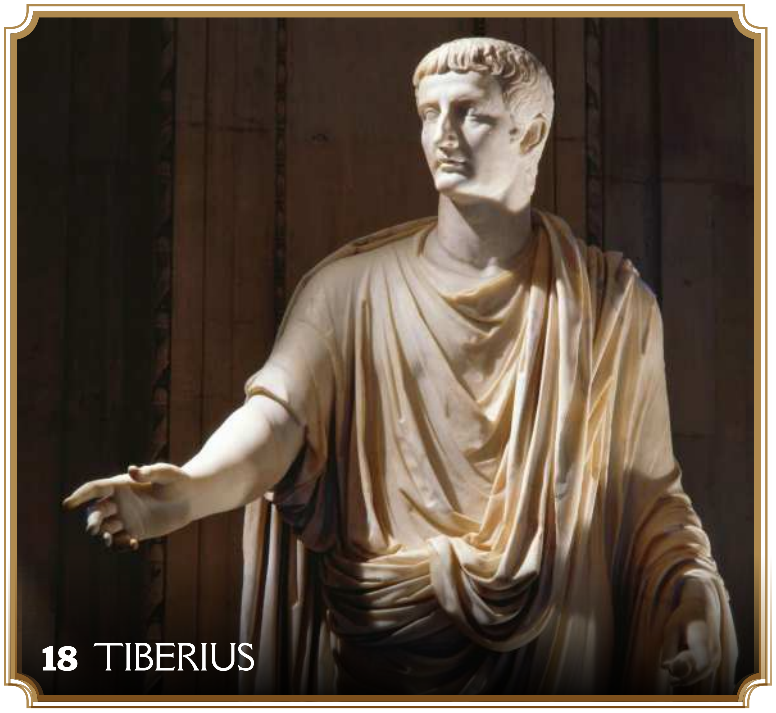
1ST CENTURY

Uncover the rulers who laid the blueprints for future Roman emperors


14 AUGUSTUS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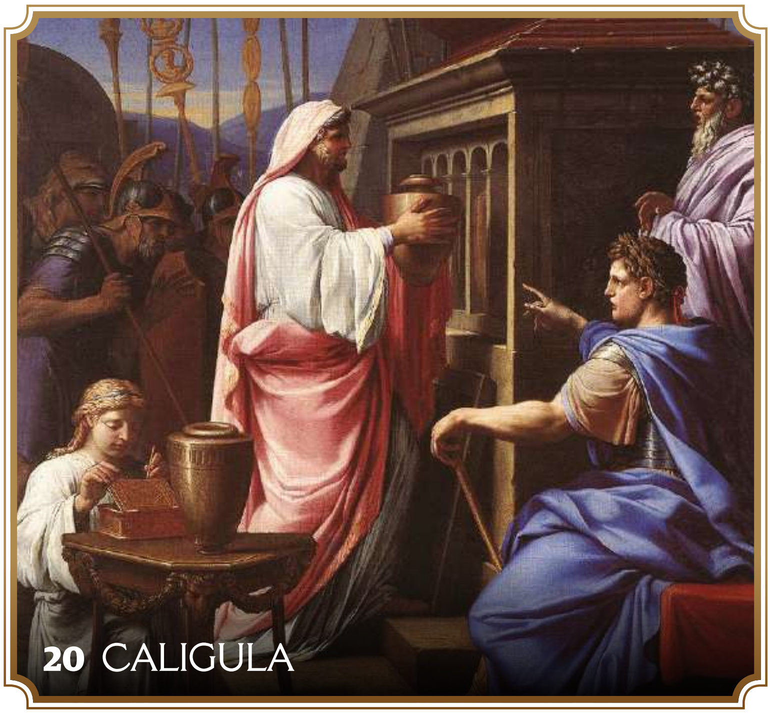
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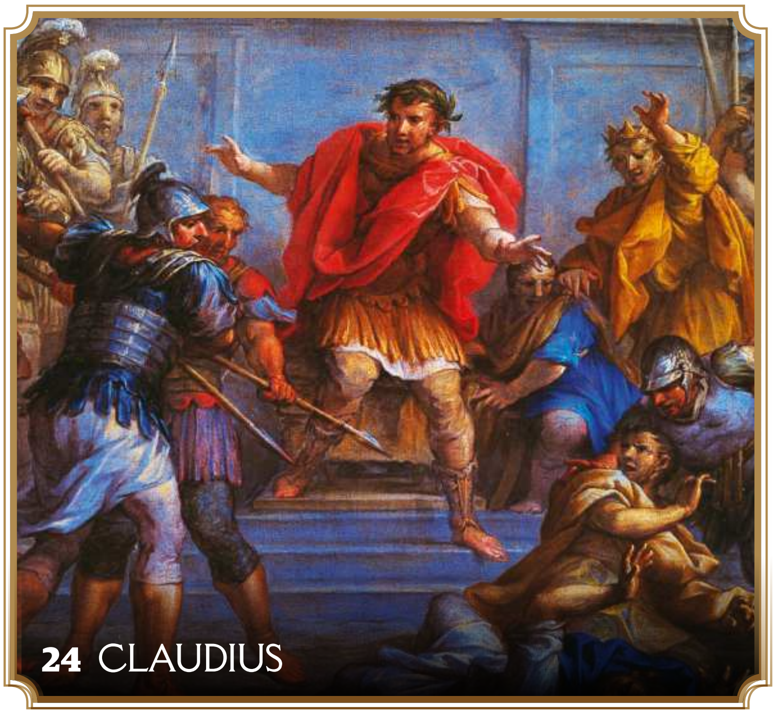
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28 NERO

34 YEAR OF THE FOUR EMPERORS

36 THE FLAVIANS

27 BCE - 14 CE

AUGUSTUS

One man was destined to become the first leader of the Roman Empire – but getting there was going to be challenge

Written by Katharine Marsh

Octavian was brought up during the civil war that he was destined to end. Born in 63 BCE to a relatively obscure patrician family, the silver lining was that he was related to the Caesars. His mother, Atai, was Julius Caesar's niece, and after the death of his father, Octavian was raised by his grandmother, who was Caesar's sister, Julia Caesaris.

But it wouldn't be until 47 BCE that Octavian and the great Julius Caesar would meet. Aged 16, it was time for the boy to don the toga virilis and become a man. Using family connections, he managed to take on responsibilities, and one of them was going to help his great-uncle Caesar fight in Hispania. However, his journey went somewhat awry when he became shipwrecked on the way there, and he had to cross enemy territory to reach his destination.

Caesar was so impressed with his grand-nephew's tenacity and spirit that he named him his political successor and the heir to his estates. During the process, he also adopted Octavian as his son. The Caesar name came with power and military might – two things that Octavian didn't want to squander. But with Caesar preoccupied with the civil war and political infighting, it is unlikely that the adoptive father and son really spent much time together.

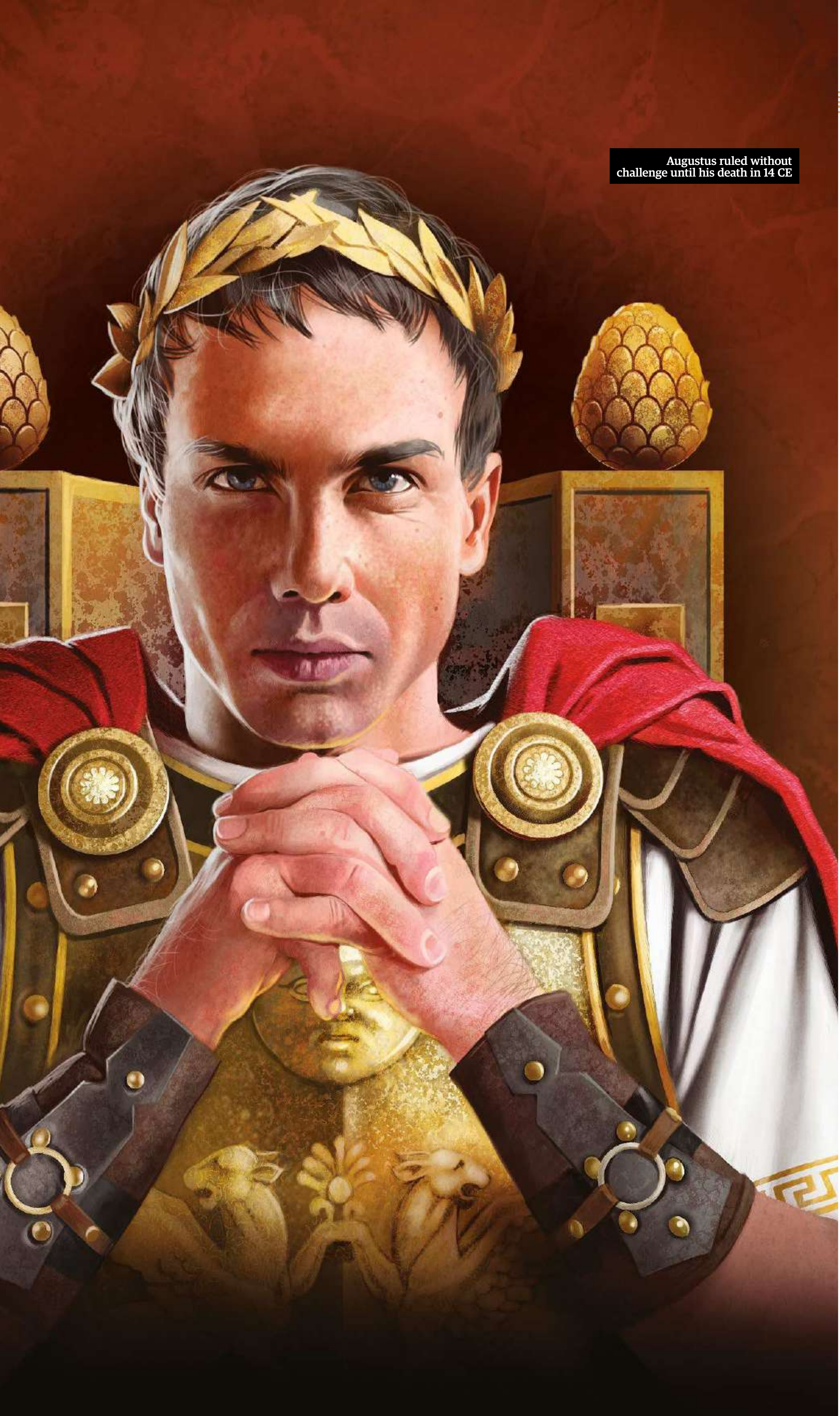
But everything changed in 44 BCE. When he heard the news of Caesar's murder, Octavian had been in Illyricum, preparing to join him on a campaign to Parthia, and to say he was distraught would be an understatement. But as his family tried to make him go into hiding as he was heir to everything the dictator had owned, a stronger emotion broke out: anger. He headed to Brundisium in southern Italy, where a large number of troops were waiting.

From this point on, Octavian made use of the Caesar name – what better way to advertise his legitimacy to rule? He went from the unknown to centre stage, and many joined his cause, his forces growing as he approached Rome. Outside the gates with his army, he demanded to be made a consul – exactly as Caesar had done before him. But his rival, Mark Antony, had taken control in the capital, and he paid no attention to the young Octavian. In fact, he even blocked having Octavian's adoption officially recognised, and prevented him from standing for office.

After months of rising tensions, Octavian had had enough. He managed to bribe two of Mark Antony's four legions to join his side, and was ready to march to Mutina where Mark Antony was besieging Decimus Brutus, one of Caesar's assassins. He finally attacked Antony on 21 April 43 BCE and smashed his enemy's forces. Mark Antony fled over the Alps, and Octavian was now a key player in Roman politics.

On 1 January 42 BCE, a new precedence was set – Julius Caesar was deified. When Caesar had died, a comet had been seen in the sky, immediately dubbed Caesar's comet, but to a people that believed in omens, it wasn't just a celestial body. Octavian announced that the comet was his adoptive father going to join the gods, and less than two years later, the Senate ratified his claim. Octavian could now call himself divi filius, or son of a god. What better political tool?

However, his anger hadn't gone away. When the Second Triumvirate was formed with his former enemy, Mark Antony, and his friend Lepidus, it was with one main goal in mind: to find and kill the conspirators who were responsible for Caesar's death. So that's what they did. Between them they travelled across Rome's territories to do battle



Augustus ruled without challenge until his death in 14 CE

ALL ABOUT AUGUSTUS

BANISHED FAMILY

When Augustus found out that his only child, Julia, had been sleeping with men out of wedlock – including one of Mark Antony's sons – he had her exiled to Ventotene and they never saw each other again.

THE ROMAN WIFE

Augustus' third wife, Livia, served as the archetypal Roman woman and wife. However, Livia was set on ensuring that her son from another marriage would rule after Augustus, and she succeeded – Tiberius ruled from 14 CE.

FAMOUS LAST WORDS

On his deathbed, Augustus' last words were reportedly: "I found Rome a city of clay but left it a city of marble." While the emperor had achieved this, his wife said his last words were: "Have I played the part well? Then applaud as I exit."

AUGUSTUS' MAUSOLEUM

Augustus built his tomb in 28 BCE. It's also home to the remains of Agrippa, Octavia Minor and Livia, and emperors Tiberius, Caligula, Claudius and Nerva.

Livia, the third wife of Emperor Augustus

ROME'S FIRST FIRST LADY

In a world run by men, wives were supposed to sit in the background, offering their husbands support while running the household. To the public, that's exactly what Livia seemed to be doing. The third wife of Augustus, she would be by his side for his entire reign, but behind her beauty lay brains.

The ultimate goal for Livia seemed to be getting one of her sons to sit on imperial throne. As Augustus had no sons of his own, he would have to adopt his heir, and Livia worked tirelessly until her son Tiberius became the next in line. In fact, some accused her of poisoning Augustus to get Tiberius into the top job faster after the emperor's death in 14 CE.

Livia became the blueprint for the empresses that would follow her – as her husband set many a precedence as emperor, Livia did the same for their wives. But even after Augustus' death, she was still an important figure. As the mother and grandmother of the next two emperors, Tiberius and Caligula, she enjoyed life as an Augusta after a self-imposed exile on Capri. She would later die in 29 CE, having wielded more power than most Roman women would ever enjoy.

at Philippi and in Sicily, among other places. But all good things must come to an end, and Mark Antony and Octavian inevitably fell out. Another civil war was looming, and it looked like a Caesar would be on one side yet again.

While Mark Antony was living in Egypt and openly shunning Octavian's sister, who was supposed to be his wife, Octavian used it to his advantage. If his enemy was spending so much time in Egypt with Cleopatra, did that mean he wanted to overthrow Octavian? Many believed that Mark Antony had become lovesick for the Egyptian queen and wanted to defeat Octavian and move to the capital, Alexandria. What made matters significantly worse was that Mark Antony recognised Caesarion, Caesar and Cleopatra's son, as 'King of Kings', and Cleopatra as 'Queen of Kings', and began splitting up the eastern part of empire under the two and his own children.

To counter Mark Antony's seemingly heretical actions, Octavian promoted Agrippa, his right-hand man, to aedile in 33 BCE, and they began to restore many of Rome's faults that had been forgotten during the years of civil war. They fixed the sewer system and the water supply while constructing new buildings to make the streets look great once again. His plan succeeded – Octavian had painted himself as a Caesar who cared about Rome. But when Mark Antony divorced Octavia, he saw red.

Octavian had the Senate declare war on Cleopatra, and the final battle for Rome began, with East and West going head to head. At the Battle of Actium in 31 BCE, the Egyptian ships were blocked by Octavian's fleet under the command of Agrippa, who was a much better military leader than his superior. Cleopatra and Mark Antony fled back to Egypt where they both committed suicide, and the remaining Egyptian forces immediately defected to the other side. It couldn't have gone any better. With Octavian the undisputed ruler of Rome, he had Caesarion and Mark Antony's eldest son, Antyllus, executed, and made Egypt a Roman province in 30 BCE. Caesarion was supposedly strangled, and Octavian apparently told him: "Two Caesars are one too many." With his position now secure, and the possible pretenders dealt with, it was time to reorganise Rome. Everyone knew that the old system wouldn't work.

After returning from the East, Octavian had his triumph through the streets of Rome in August 29 BCE, and settled large amounts of veterans in Italy and the provinces with little to no fuss – perhaps he had now superseded his adoptive father, who had nothing but trouble from the Senate when he had tried to resettle Pompey the Great's veterans.

What shocked the Senate most was that Octavian rejected being in power in 29 BCE. Of course, this was mostly for show; the Senate all but begged, and the leader put on a pretence of reluctantly accepting. He had the Senate on his side, but he'd learned from his adoptive father's mistakes – he needed to keep them happy.

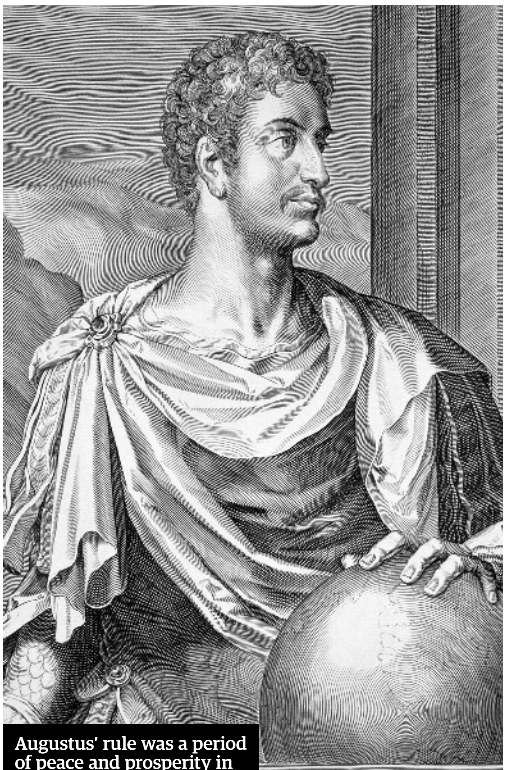
Unlike his great-uncle, this is something he managed to do throughout his entire rule. In 27 BCE, the Senate granted him the title of 'Augustus', which he then began to use instead of Octavian, and he was given more power over the years – he didn't have to seize it like those before him. He was appointed the overseer of Rome's grain supply in 22 BCE, and the year before that he'd been given the right to call a Senate. They also kept renewing his lone rule.

In 13 BCE, Augustus took the title of Pontifex Maximus, the highest religious office in Ancient

Agrippa, Augustus' right-hand man until his death in 12 BCE. He was responsible for some of Augustus' most important victories, like at the Battle of Actium

Augustus of Prima Porta, a statue of the first Roman emperor made after his death that mixed myth and reality

The *Aeneid* charted Augustus' heritage back to the hero Aeneas fleeing Troy



Augustus' rule was a period of peace and prosperity in which Rome attained the height of its imperial power

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The *Res Gestae Divi Augusti* can still be seen today at the back of the Ara Pacis Museum in Rome

Rome. It seemed fitting that the son of a god was now the holiest man in what would later become known as the empire. Of course, Augustus wanted to avoid the idea of kings, as the Roman Kingdom was not exactly remembered of fondly – what he promoted instead was the revitalisation of the republic. In 2 BCE, he was also bestowed the title of Pater Patriae, or Father of the Country.

It was to be a golden age for Rome as the empire flourished after the dark days of the civil war. Buildings made of glistening marble sprang up, with as many as 82 temples being built or restored in the space of a year, according to Augustus himself. Libraries and theatres appeared, along with the original version of the Pantheon. In fact, so much building and rebuilding took place under Augustus and his supporters that the emperor is said to have quipped that he had inherited a city of clay but left behind one of marble.

Of course, as in any regime, propaganda was rife. Augustus' face was everywhere on statues, busts and coins. Some coins even had Caesar's comet on the back, highlighting the familial connection between the two men in a shrewd move to cement Augustus' position. It was also hard to miss the *Res Gestae Divi Augusti* (or *Deeds of the Divine Augustus*), upon which his legitimacy and great deeds were laid out clear as day for everyone to read with his divinity laid out in the title itself. But if you were illiterate, it didn't really matter – the wall on which the writing had been carved was so enormous that you'd still get the sense of grandeur and power.

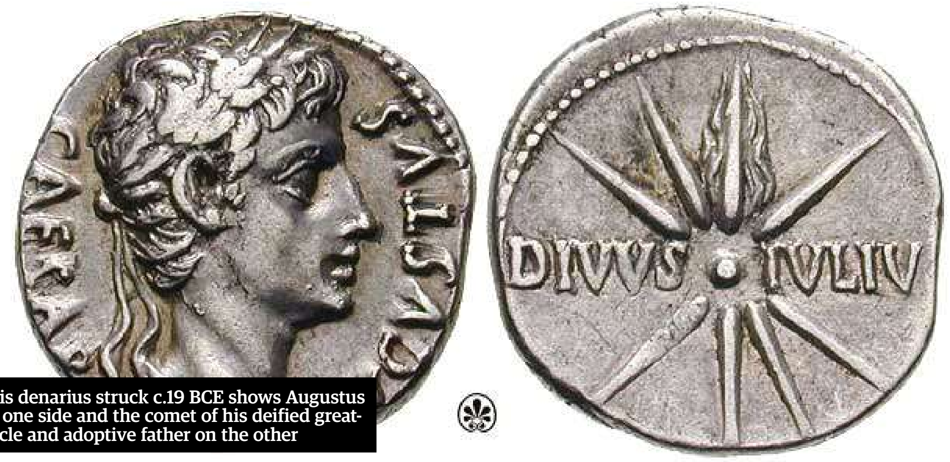
The literate also had another bit of propaganda they could read: Virgil's *Aeneid*. Telling the story of the founding of Rome by Aeneas, who had fled the legendary Trojan War, Virgil claimed that Augustus could trace his lineage through Aeneas and back to the goddess Venus. This then made its way into art, with the most famous statue of the emperor, the *Prima Porta*, showing Cupid, Venus' son, by his side. A departure from the Republican statues of leaders, Augustus is depicted as a youthful ruler instead of an older man – a new portrayal of power for a new era.

It was family where Augustus would become unstuck, though. Despite having three wives, he only had one legitimate child, Julia, but she wasn't exactly a paragon of virtue. The emperor's daughter was accused of promiscuity after her second husband, Agrippa, left her – something that was unacceptable under Augustus' new laws outlawing promiscuity in an attempt to make marriages more stable. When she allegedly had an affair with Mark Antony's son, she had gone too far for even her father to forgive her. Exiled in 2 BCE, she later died of malnutrition.

But what was to come of the leadership when Augustus died? He had no sons of his own, so he fell back on an option that set a precedence for many other emperors: he adopted an heir. His third wife, Livia, had a son from a previous marriage who would be a good candidate, so Augustus adopted the young Tiberius, believing his beloved empire would be left in safe hands.

14 CE would be the end of the Augustan age. Dying in Nola, the other side of Mount Vesuvius from the now-famous Pompeii, his body was taken back to Rome. On the day of the funeral, businesses closed as the emperor was taken to be cremated, with his ashes interred in the mausoleum he'd had built in 28 BCE.

The legacy he left behind was great. Made a god by Tiberius, he would be remembered throughout the Roman Empire for presiding over a golden age after the years of fighting. He was the man who had built an empire that would last for centuries and he would not be forgotten.



This denarius struck c.19 BCE shows Augustus on one side and the comet of his deified great-uncle and adoptive father on the other

© Creative Commons; Miguel Hermoso Cuesta.

TIBERIUS

14-37 CE

The great Augustus had been Tiberius' stepfather and at the start, Tiberius wasn't the one who was supposed to take his place. However, as the other candidates for the position of emperor died over the years, the burden finally fell on Tiberius' shoulders. His reign started well, but over time he became more unpopular, eventually being accused of tyranny thanks to his use of Sejanus, the head of his Praetorian Guard. In response, the emperor relocated to the island of Capri in the Bay of Naples in 27 CE, and it was there that he stayed for the rest of his life. Before he died, he made his adoptive grandson Gaius, later known as Caligula, and his actual grandson Gemellus joint heirs to the empire.

© Getty Images

37-41 CE

CALIGULA

Did the depraved Roman emperor, known for his horsing around, deserve the boot?

Written by Katharine Marsh

There were many megalomaniac rulers in the ancient world, but there was only one who allegedly tried to give his horse a political office. That honour is bestowed upon Gaius Julius Caesar Germanicus, better known today as Caligula, who was the third emperor of Rome from 37 to 41 CE. Only on the throne for four years, it's a wonder he made a mark at all - nonetheless, his reputation precedes him. It's said that Caligula was insane and led a reign of terror before being assassinated, but is that a fair assessment?

Caligula wasn't always destined to rule. While he was descended from the great Augustus through his mother, his family fell from grace during Tiberius' reign. His mother and brothers were all accused of treason, dying in prison or exile. Caligula, meanwhile, was shielded by his grandmother until the death of Sejanus, Tiberius' lethal right-hand man, in 31 CE. A year later, Caligula had got back in Rome's good books and moved in with the aging emperor. He had even been named heir along with his cousin, Tiberius Gemellus, who was the emperor's natural grandson.

It was here that Caligula was overindulged. Living on the sunny island of Capri just off the Bay of Naples, he got a taste for the excess that his guardian enjoyed. The Roman historian Suetonius wrote of their sadistic fun, going as far as saying that "even in those days Caligula could not control his natural brutality. He loved watching tortures and executions." But there's a very real problem with using Suetonius as an accurate source for Caligula. While he is known for his *Twelve Caesars*, a series of books about Rome's rulers from Julius Caesar to Domitian, these accounts were filled with gossip and hearsay. It also doesn't help that Suetonius was writing almost 100 years after Caligula's rule, during the reign of Hadrian.

The test of Caligula's character would come at the death of Tiberius in 37 CE. Now 25 years of age, Caligula was thrust into the spotlight as co-emperor with his cousin - until Gemellus' suspicious death. While some argue that Caligula had nothing to do with it, the opposition is much stronger. How could he not resist getting rid of the man who stood between him and total power of one of the greatest empires the Mediterranean had ever seen? Whatever happened, Caligula was now alone at the top.

At first, the people loved him. The murderous Tiberius hadn't exactly been popular, and a new, youthful emperor was a welcome change. He abolished the detested treason trials, recalled exiles and gave his Praetorian Guard - essentially the emperor's bodyguards - a nice bonus. He entertained the masses with gladiator matches and chariot races, rebuilt temples and spent huge amounts of money on new buildings. But then he took it a little too far when he requisitioned hundreds of merchant ships. Why?

DEFINING MOMENT

Little Bootikins

As a young child, Caligula accompanied his war-hero father, Germanicus, around the empire. He would often join his father as he inspected troops, and even wore a miniature centurion uniform, complete with little hobnail boots, or caligae. That was where his infamous nickname came from. Affectionately bestowed by his father's soldiers, it meant something like 'Little Boots' or 'Bootikins'.

14-16 CE

"How could he not resist getting rid of the man who stood between him and total power"

DEFINING MOMENT

A new home

After years of being sheltered by his grandmother during his family's fall from grace, Caligula made his home on the island of Capri living with Emperor Tiberius. The ageing tyrant ruled Rome remotely from the pleasure palace of Villa Jovi ('Villa of Jupiter') in his final years, where he was said to also have indulged his most depraved vices, from debauched sexual acts to torturing his enemies.

31 CE

To build a two-mile floating bridge across the Bay of Naples, and then gallop back and forth on it on his horse, of course. As a result, there were no boats left to transport grain into Rome, so the capital allegedly suffered a food shortage. While some historians think there's no way this can be true, there is archaeological evidence of pleasure barges built for Caligula. The boats were filled with marble decor, statues and mosaics, but their remains were unfortunately destroyed by fire during World War II.

Things only got worse. It was easy for everyone to see that Caligula was a bit unstable. Within six months of becoming emperor, he had suffered an illness that nearly took his life. Historians today are divided on the cause - it was perhaps epilepsy or maybe a breakdown - but most are able to agree on the outcome. Whatever happened to him during this period of sickness, it was his actions from this point on that would earn him his reputation as nothing short of a bloodthirsty madman.

Like any other Roman leader of the early empire, he led his troops in battle, this time heading for the Rhine and as far north as the English Channel. But Caligula didn't necessarily make them do real battle - according to Cassius Dio, he had the war trumpet sounded and then forced his soldiers to gather shells in their helmets. Not even the Romans could explain such bizarre behaviour.

DEFINING MOMENT

Off to a good start

The first six months or so of Caligula's rule were a welcome change from Tiberius' iron fist. As well as commissioning building projects and hosting great games to entertain the people, the young emperor also offered amnesty for exiles and abolished the hated treason trials. Things were looking promising for a flourishing Rome, but his almost limitless power soon went to the 24-year-old's head.

37 CE

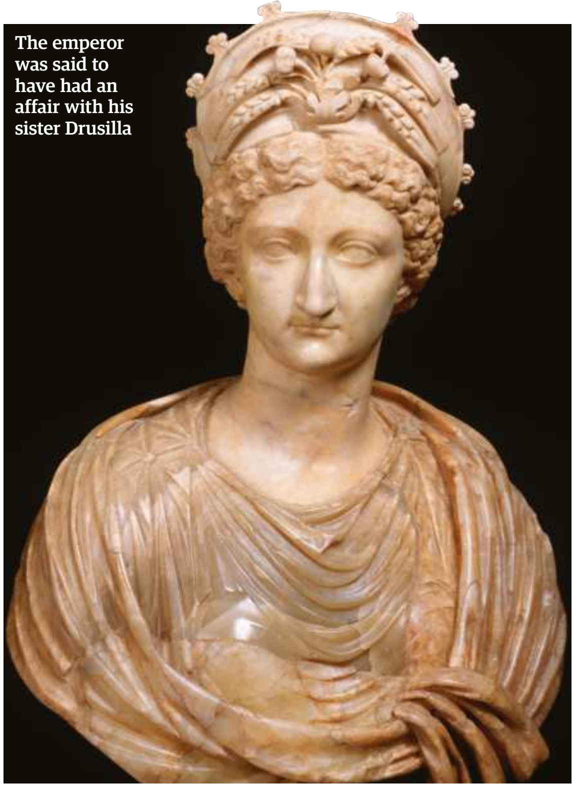
> "Whatever happened during this period of sickness, it was his actions from this point that would earn him his reputation as a bloodthirsty madman"

Battle was a mainstay of Roman life, as each emperor would fight to attain glory, but it has been argued that Caligula led meaningless campaigns in Germany just to say that he'd won conflicts. He also continued the Roman policy of hostility and intolerance towards the Jewish population in Judaea, and things got worse for them when they refused to worship him as a living deity. Caligula reportedly ordered that a colossal statue of himself be put inside the Temple of Jerusalem, but he was fortunately talked down from the idea.

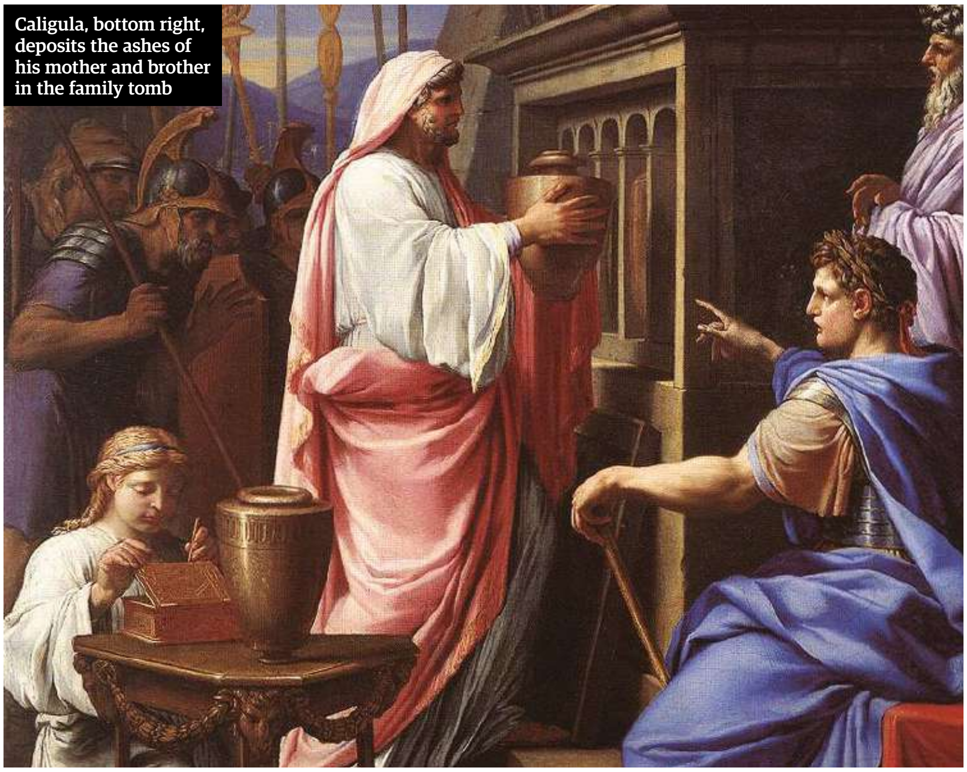
Just when you think the madness will finally stop, when you're sure that by now the powerful Roman Senate would have had enough of its problematic emperor, the troubles keep on coming. Perhaps the most famous story associated with the emperor regards his horse, Incitatus. That horse received things that many Roman citizens could only dream of - an ivory manger, a jewelled collar and even supposedly a house. Caligula was certainly a man of excess, and Incitatus was said to have been fed a mixture of rolled oats and gold flakes (which is probably untrue).

The legend goes that Caligula loved Incitatus so much that he decided to make his equestrian companion consul, an elected official just below the emperor. It was the epitome of insanity, arguably the main thing that comes to mind today when you mention Caligula's name - but it was probably a lie. This particular tale was put forward by Roman author Cassius Dio, who, like Suetonius, was writing years after the fact. Having said that, historian Aloys Winterling argued that if it did actually happen, it was because Caligula was mocking his Senate. In *Caligula: A Biography*, he puts forward the idea that the emperor was emphasising that a consul's job was so meaningless that even a horse could do it.

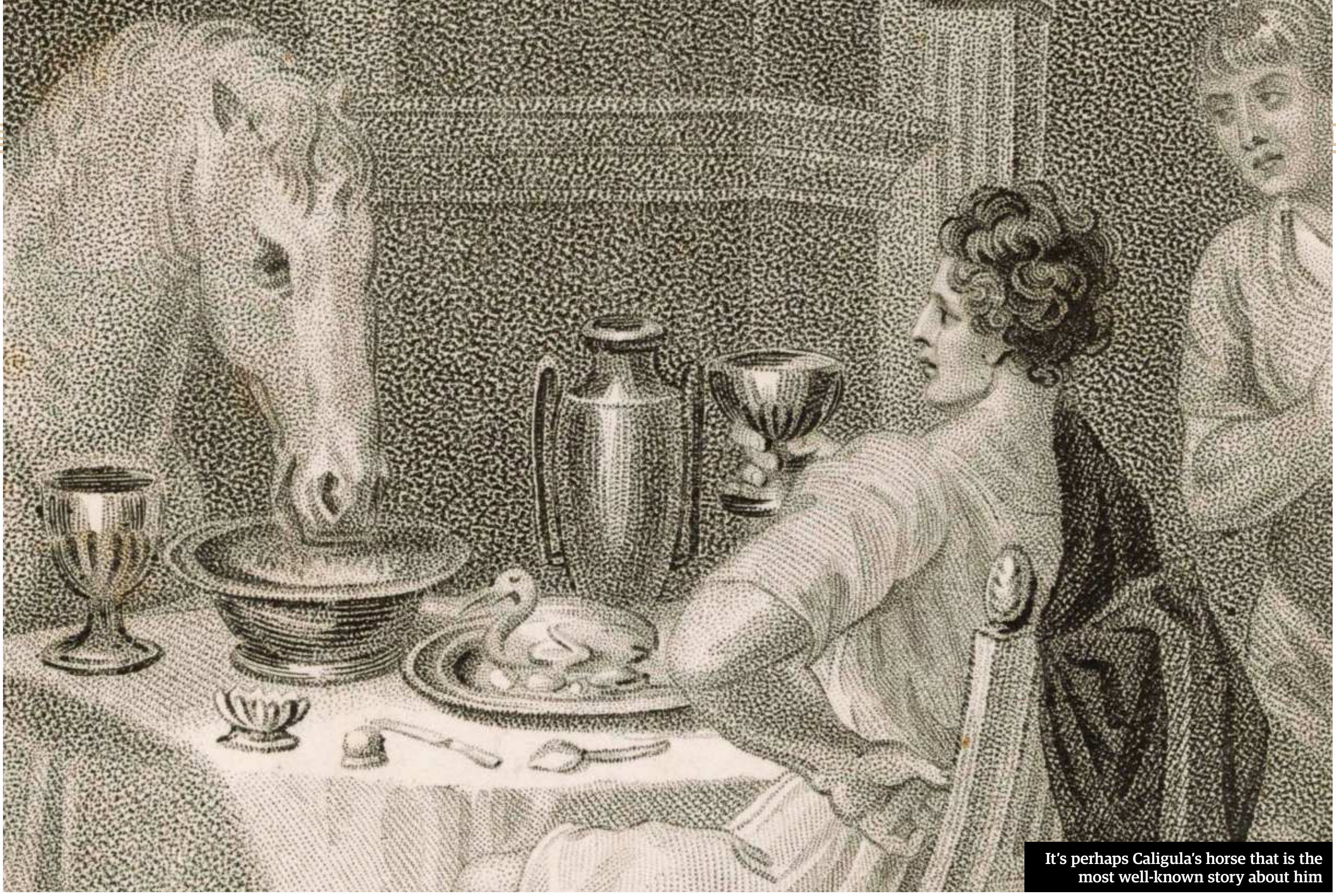
Herein lies the problem with studying Caligula, and many other Roman emperors: we can't back up some of the sources we have, especially those making salacious and outlandish claims. It also doesn't help that things like mental illness weren't necessarily recognised in the ancient world, and certainly not seen as they are today. It's because of



The emperor was said to have had an affair with his sister Drusilla

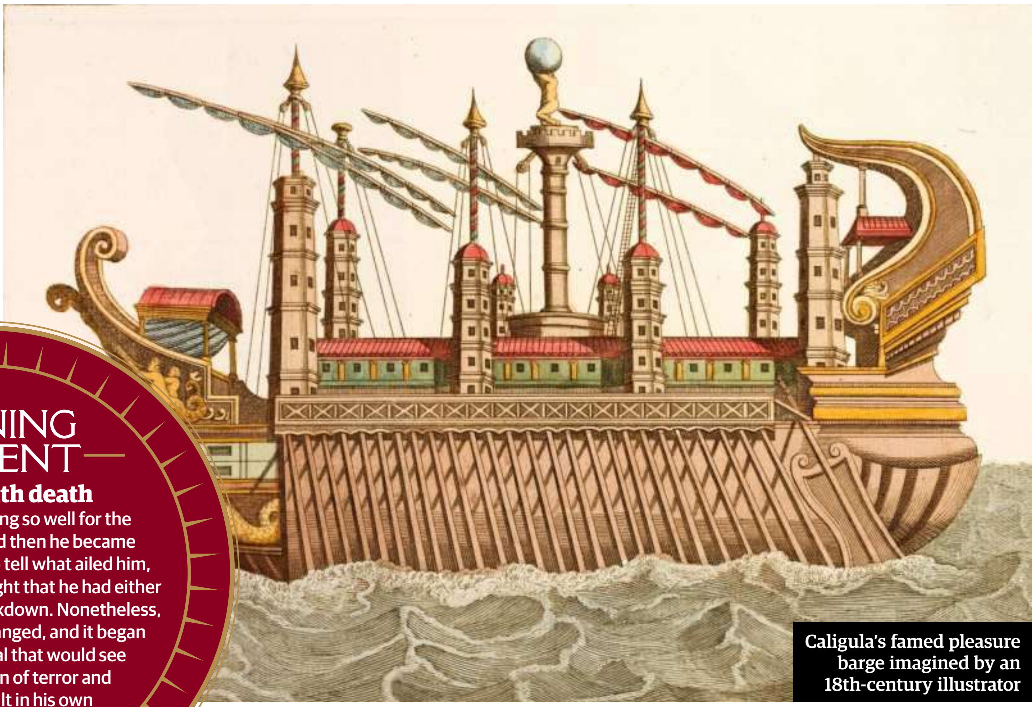


Caligula, bottom right, deposits the ashes of his mother and brother in the family tomb


It's perhaps Caligula's horse that is the most well-known story about him

this that the argument of Caligula being mentally ill is relatively recent, and with today's mindset it's difficult to refute. After all, we can't help but view history through the lens of the time we're living in.

But something that we know for a fact is that Caligula was running out of money. Despite raising taxes again (this time on things like weddings and prostitutes), his treasury was being bled dry by his extravagance and building projects, and many people were starting to lose patience with him. Plots and conspiracies popped up all over Rome, but the one that was successful was where no plot should have come from – his Praetorian Guard. The emperor's own bodyguards were the men who were ultimately successful in getting rid of him.


Caligula's famed pleasure barge imagined by an 18th-century illustrator

On 24 January 41 CE, Caligula was heading to have a quick bath to help get over a hangover. Down a back alley in the imperial compound in Rome, he was ambushed by a group of soldiers led by Cassius Chaerea, a soldier who had born the brunt of a fair few of Caligula's insults, and who had quite frankly had enough. He was the first Roman emperor to be assassinated, and that alone must prove his inability to rule, or at least that his people were unable to put up with his maniacal tendencies any longer. One family member who survived a quick purge of Caligula's relatives was invited to become emperor – cowering behind a curtain, it was Claudius who would come to rule next.

DEFINING MOMENT

A brush with death

Things had been going so well for the young emperor – and then he became seriously ill. It's hard to tell what ailed him, but it's commonly thought that he had either an epileptic fit or a breakdown. Nonetheless, Caligula's attitude changed, and it began the downward spiral that would see him impose a reign of terror and ultimately result in his own brutal demise.

c.38 CE

As we've seen, the way we view Caligula today has been undeniably shaped by historians who weren't around during his lifetime. These tales have been immortalised in books, films and plays. If you mention the emperor's name today, it conjures images of a madman with an unhealthy obsession with his horse. While parts of these tales must be true (why else would he be murdered by those paid to protect him?), we can never know how far Caligula actually went and how much he was guided by mental instability from his period of illness. But salacious rumours tend to stick much better than the little truth we do know, so he'll be no doubt be referred to – in the words of Mary Beard – as a "template of tyranny" for a long time to come.

© Alamy, Getty Images

41-54CE

CLAUDIUS

Though the late Western Roman Empire treated Britain as an afterthought, it was the source of some of its most troublesome rebellions, stripping itself of its Romans until none were left

Written by **Charlie Ginger**

In the summer of 10 BCE, 26-year-old Antonia Minor gave birth to a son in the city of Lungdunum in southern Gaul, a disabled boy seemingly destined for a life on the periphery who would one day rise to greatness. His name was Tiberius Claudius Nero Germanicus, but everyone would come to know him as Claudius.

While being born into the Roman imperial family was a luxury afforded to a fortunate few, young Claudius did not enjoy an easy childhood. Afflicted with several disabilities (including a limp, a speech impediment and partial deafness), Claudius was viewed with barely vieled disdain by much of his family, and blatant disgust by his mother, who labelled him a monstrosity and mocked his apparent stupidity. Being the grandson of Augustus' wife, Livia, and the nephew of Tiberius counted for little in the eyes of those around him.

Thankfully for young Claudius, his grandmother offered some escape from his mother's torments, although she was also a harsh figure who often lambasted him for his supposed laziness. Yet if he could find little comfort in the bosom of his family, Claudius was exceptionally fortunate when it came to the appointment of his teacher, for he was to be schooled by none other than Livy.

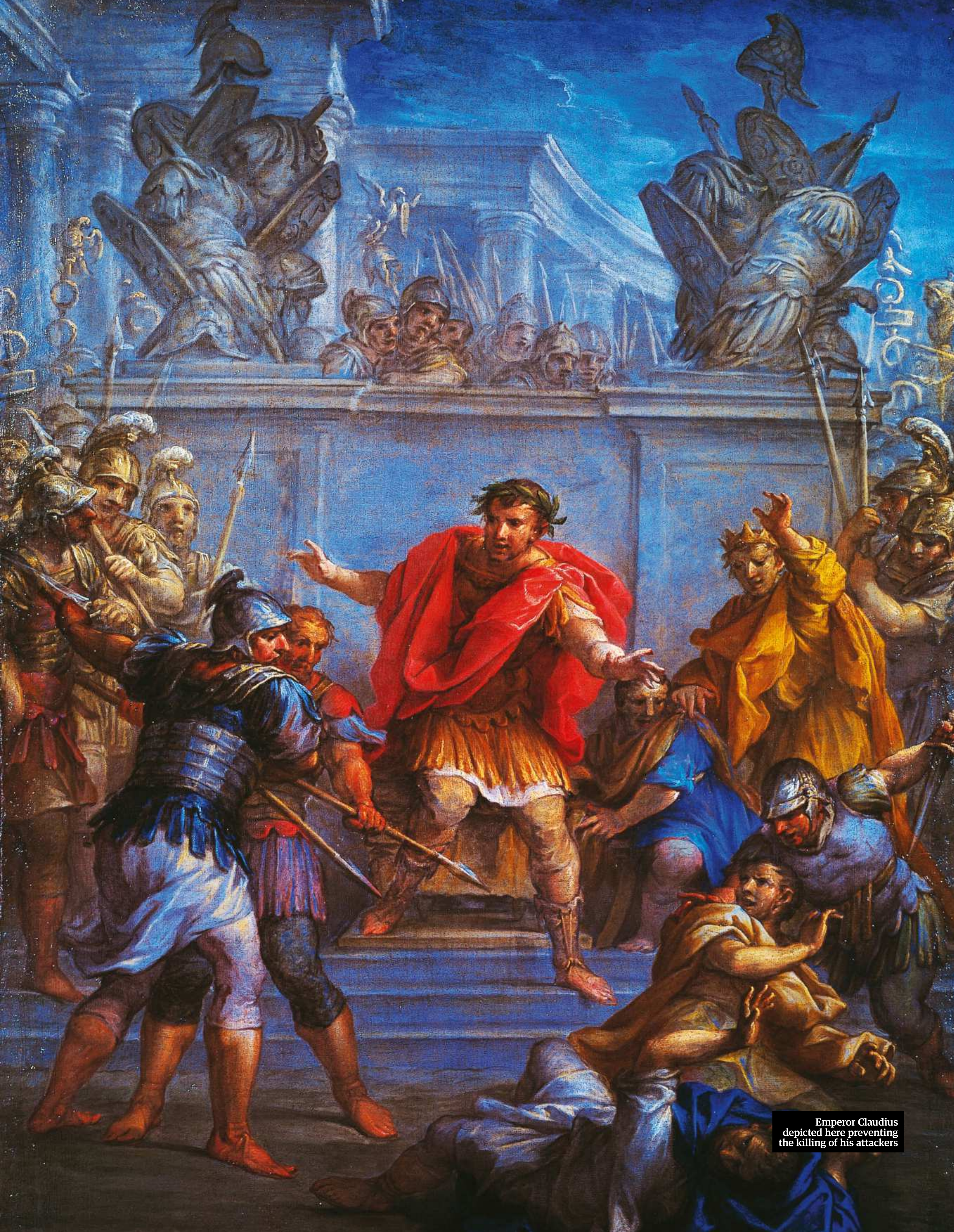
In 17-year-old Claudius, Livy found a willing pupil, for the future emperor was a keen reader and student of history. His prowess in this subject coincided with a reduction in his symptoms, which seemed to fade with maturity. Yet while this should have endeared him to his family, it is a cruel twist of irony that in seeking solace in the past, Claudius would embark on penning a history that would enrage his relatives even more than his disability ever could.

Cutting a little too close to the imperial bone, Claudius' work on Rome's civil wars is believed to have been too honest, particularly on the subject of Augustus, then ruler of Rome. Yet while this saw him forced ever further away from high-profile public life, the common folk of Rome were conversely appreciative of Claudius, a support that no doubt offered some comfort when his uncle, Tiberius, ignored his pleas for a public position after the passing of Augustus in 14 CE. Even so, no amount of plebeian affection could convince the true powers in Rome to invest any hope in Claudius, who retreated yet again into a very private existence. He seemed set for a life that would escape the attentions of history. Then Caligula came to power.

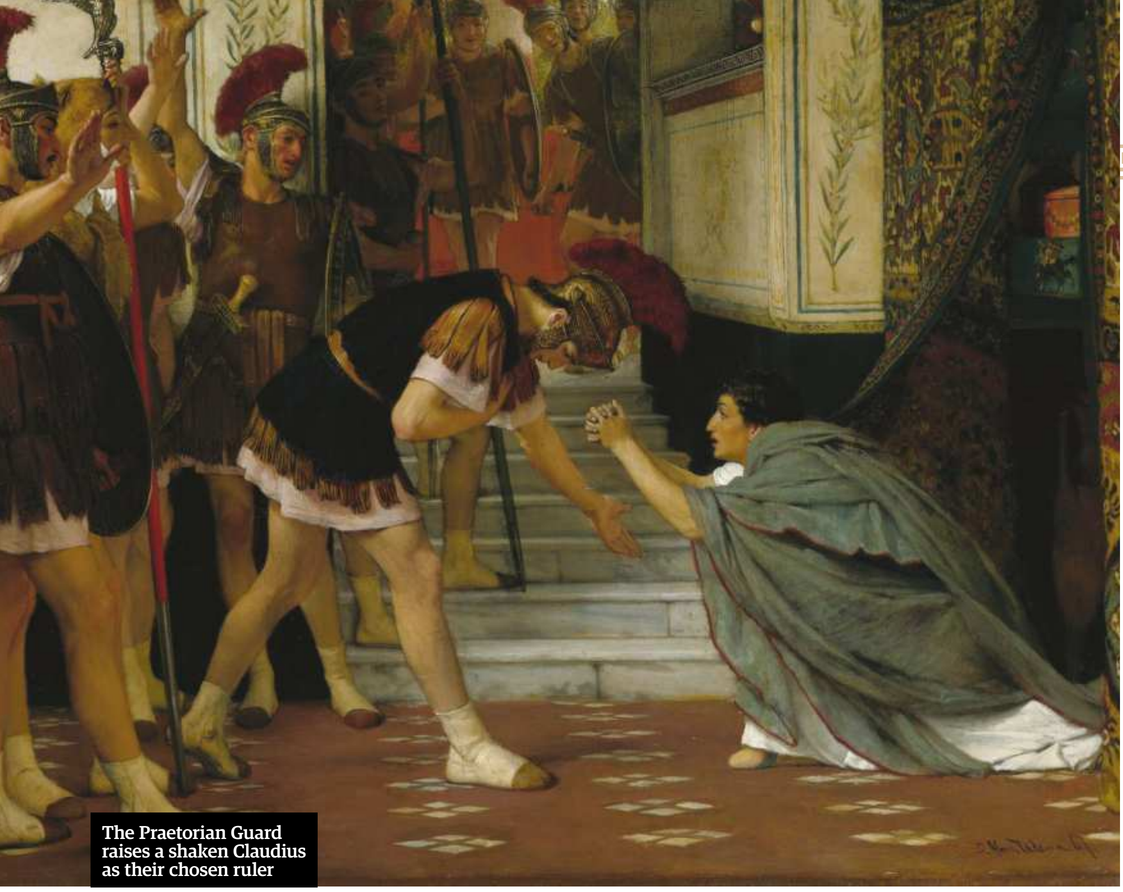
"No amount of plebeian affection could convince the true powers in Rome to invest any hope in Claudius"

Appointed as his nephew's co-consul in 37 CE, Claudius had finally achieved the imperial recognition he had always sought, even if it did come at the cost of being routinely mistreated by Caligula. His prospects appeared to be improving further still a year after this appointment, for in 38

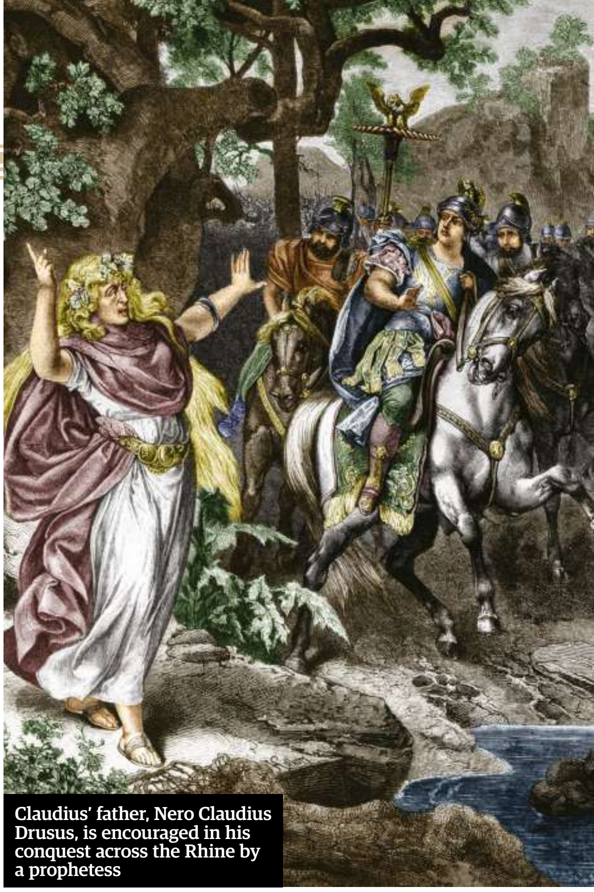
Valeria Messalina, Claudius' scheming third wife, clutching their son Britannicus, who would later be 'removed' by his stepbrother, Nero



Emperor Claudius depicted here preventing the killing of his attackers



The Praetorian Guard raises a shaken Claudius as their chosen ruler



Claudius' father, Nero Claudius Drusus, is encouraged in his conquest across the Rhine by a prophetess

CE Claudius would marry his third wife, Valeria Messalina (he had already been wed to Plautia Urgulanilla and Aelia Paetina, both of whom bore him a child), the daughter of a consul and first cousin to Nero.

Born in either 17 or 20 CE to Domitia Lepida the Younger (herself the daughter of the extremely successful general Lucius Ahenobarbus) and her husband, Marcus Barbatus, Messalina has been described as a rapacious sexual deviant and a ruthless operator (no doubt some of which is the exaggeration of her rivals). Yet while some of the tales of her excesses are no doubt false (perhaps a result of her familial ties with Augustus, Caligula and Nero), what is not in doubt is that Valeria was merciless in her efforts to have female members of Claudius' family exiled, going so far as to convince her husband to have one of his nieces executed for incest. Manipulated (some sources claim incredibly easily) at home by his wife (who by 41 CE had given him a daughter in Claudia Octavia and a son named Britannicus), Claudius continued to be mocked publicly by Caligula. However, he was far from being alone as the subject of the emperor's wrath, an inherent cruelty that in 41 CE would change the course of history.

While the identities of all of the conspirators are likely to remain lost, what is beyond doubt is that a plot to assassinate Caligula had been hatched by Cassius Chaera, head of the Praetorian Guard, and a number of senators well before the chosen date of 24 January. On this fateful day, the plotters fell upon Caligula in the grounds of his palace, repeatedly stabbing him in front of onlookers. Caligula's private guards swiftly retaliated by scything down the murderers and several innocent nobles, driven by grief and anger. Chaos duly ensued, during which Claudius was uncovered hiding behind a curtain inside the imperial palace, and instantly declared emperor.

Despite being relieved to have been spared, Claudius was in fact incredibly vulnerable due to the nature of his rise to power – a fact that did not escape him. With the Senate refusing to accept him as emperor for two days before eventually acquiescing, Claudius realised that he needed to win their approval. He decided that the mysterious island of Britannia would provide him with the perfect opportunity.

Previously invaded by Julius Caesar in 55 and 54 BCE, Britannia had largely escaped the attentions of the Roman Empire ever since. In 43 CE Claudius determined to be the first emperor to conquer the island, and duly dispatched four legions under the command of Aulus Plautius to gain a foothold across the Channel.

Inevitably, the Romans were met with stiff resistance in places, but it proved futile, and it wasn't long before Claudius arrived on the island as its conqueror atop an elephant, a stunt designed to impress his obvious might upon his new subjects. By 47 CE, half of the inhabitants of Britannia fell into this category.

While the successful invasion and subjugation of Britannia rightfully stands as his greatest achievement, Claudius' lesser-known triumphs are equally worthy of mention, first among them

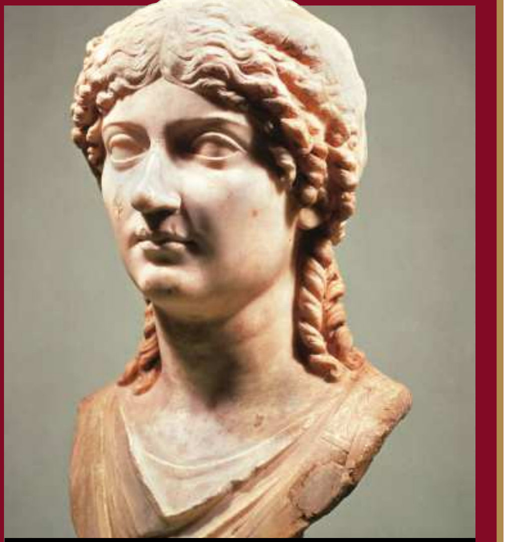
AGRIPPINA THE YOUNGER

Not content to rule as empress, Agrippina resorted to lethal means to ensure her son would rule

Great-granddaughter to Augustus and the younger sibling of Caligula, Agrippina was born into a prominent family, one that required she made an appropriate marriage at the right age. To Tiberius, this was deemed to be at just 13, and she was duly wed to her cousin Gnaeus Domitius Ahenobarbus in 28 CE, a man aged 44 at the time. It would prove to be a crucial union, for nine years later young Agrippina would give birth to a son: Nero.

Despite later being implicated in a plot to murder Caligula and the loss of her first husband, Agrippina managed to continue her seemingly inexorable climb towards the summit of power. Her second husband, Gaius Passienus, was an important figure who would serve as consul twice, and then she married Claudius on New Year's Day in 49 CE.

According to many critics of Claudius, Agrippina was the real power behind the throne, and she even managed to convince the emperor to shun his own son and nominate Nero as his heir instead. When Claudius died in 54 CE, Agrippina wasted no time in securing power for Nero – if only she knew that this course of action would later be repaid by her only son having her murdered.



Said to be beautiful, Agrippina was also ruthless – a trait that eventually led to her bloody downfall

> "What is beyond doubt is that a plot to assassinate Caligula had been hatched by Cassius Chaera"

the other areas into which the Roman Empire expanded during its first major spell of growth since the rule of Augustus.

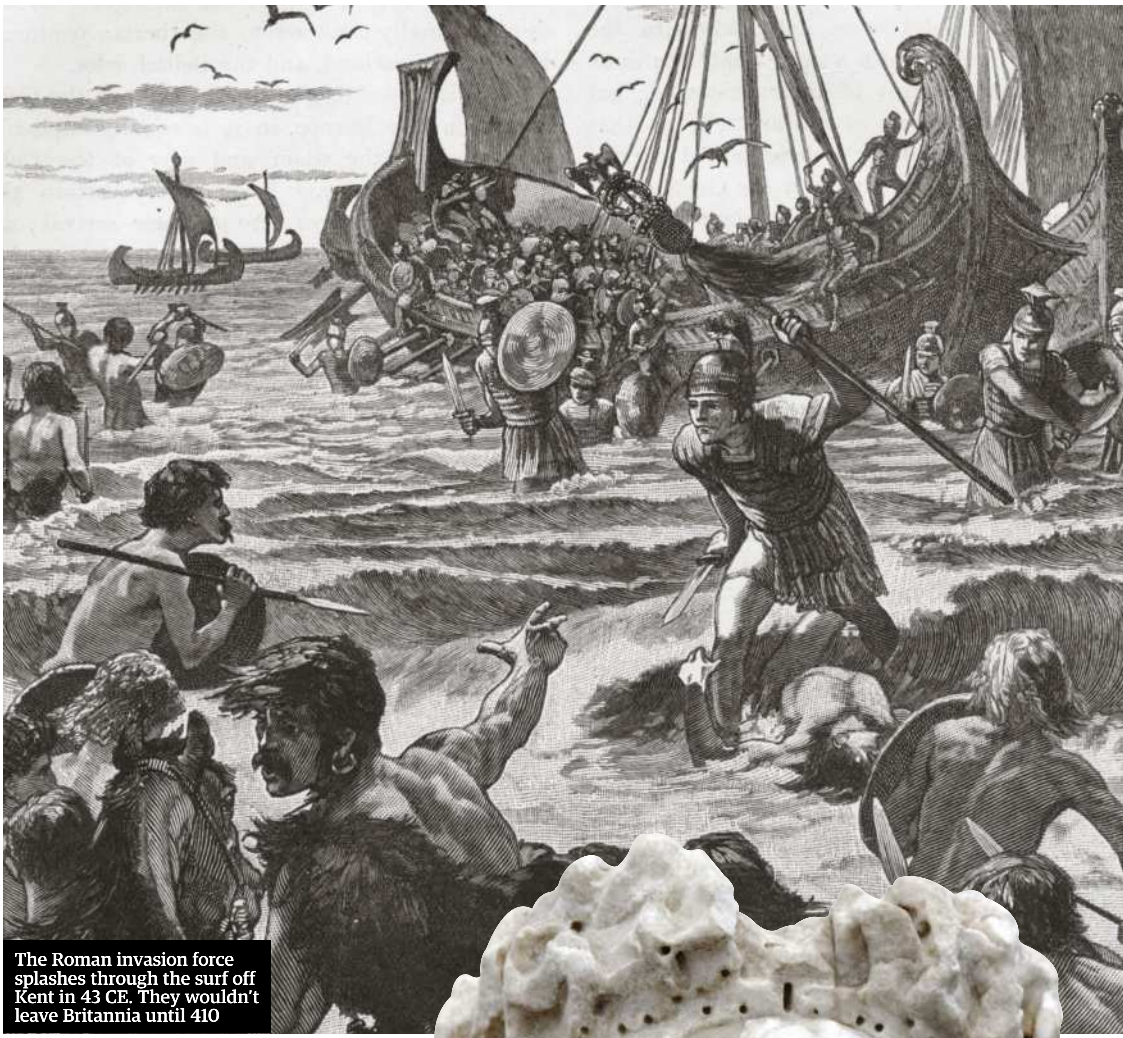
This period of enlargement saw Judaea, Thrace (today divided between Greece, Turkey and Bulgaria) and Lycia (now in Turkey) consumed, among other territories, each placed under the direct rule of Rome or completely annexed. Claudius also oversaw the establishment of a number of colonies that were then afforded the prestigious privilege of Roman citizenship. This had the double benefit of increasing the empire's population (which in 48 CE was recorded at just below six million), as well as cementing Roman holdings in far-flung regions that may otherwise have erupted in rebellion.

Closer to home, Claudius paid special attention to judicial and legislative matters, often presiding as judge over cases, settling provincial disagreements and creating new laws, one of which made the false assumption of citizenship a crime punishable by death. When he wasn't busying himself with legal wranglings, he was often poring over plans for the construction of new roads, canals and aqueducts, with two of the latter built during his reign.

Domestic success proved consistently forthcoming for Claudius, including the devotion of the plebeians with whom he often supped. However, his private life was a less straightforward affair, and in 48 CE it took a stunning downturn when Messalina unwisely chose to marry Gaius Silius while her husband was away inspecting the construction of a harbour.

While her exact motives remain unclear, Messalina quickly became aware that she had finally overreached herself. Such a wanton act of treason could not be tolerated, and despite her best efforts to placate an embarrassed Claudius, Messalina was eventually tracked down to a garden in which she had sought to escape punishment, and put to the sword by a royal guard. Fatefully for Claudius, he chose not to content himself with his three surviving children (his first child, Claudius Drusus, choked on a pear at just four years old in 20 CE) and abstain from further marriage, instead opting to wed his final wife, Agrippina the Younger, who was also his niece, in 49 CE.

Said to have been a beautiful woman, Claudius' 34-year-old bride was also fantastically ruthless. Having birthed a son in 37 CE (a boy who would become Emperor Nero), Agrippina's ambition proved insatiable, the empress of Rome's drive left unsated despite her being afforded titles such as Augusta. For Agrippina, the ultimate goal was to coerce Claudius into adopting her son, something she achieved with guile.



The Roman invasion force splashes through the surf off Kent in 43 CE. They wouldn't leave Britannia until 410

While his previous deference to the whims of his wives suggest that Claudius was yet again being controlled by his spouse, the fact that he later began to renege on this agreement and instead leaned towards naming Britannicus as his heir implies that Claudius was not as weak as some sources claim. Even so, his change of heart would have fatal consequences, because Agrippina's designs were not about to be thwarted.

On 13 October 54 CE Claudius died at the age of 63, allegedly as a result of being served poisoned mushrooms by Agrippina at a feast. Nero was swiftly hoisted upon the throne, and in one fell swoop Agrippina ended a successful 13-year reign to start another that would be marked sadism and end in bloodshed.

A bust of Emperor Claudius, a man regarded as astute by some and gullible by others

© Alamy, Getty, Creative Commons; Farnese Collection

54-68 CE

NERO

He slaughtered Christians, murdered his loved ones and possibly set Rome ablaze, but who was the real man behind the myth of the monstrous Emperor Nero?

Written by **Frances White**

Emperor Nero was going to die. The Senate had ordered his death, and the last remnant of control he had was to claim his death himself. Nero paced back and forth muttering the same words over and over again: "What an artist dies in me."

All his friends had abandoned him, and his own dark acts had led him to this moment, but still he refused to acknowledge it. He wasn't a ruthless killer, he was just misunderstood - an artist. What a pity for the world to lose such a remarkable artist. In the distance, he heard the rumble of hooves: they were coming for his blood, but he would not give it to them. They had called him greedy, frivolous, self-indulgent, and now he would be - his blood was his own, not the Senate's or the usurper's, and blood was all Nero had left.

When Nero was born on 15 December 37 CE, the Julio-Claudian dynasty had been ruling the Roman Empire for more than 50 years. This line, through adoption, could be traced back to the famed and celebrated Julius Caesar himself. Since his death, the man had taken on an almost god-like status, and those 'descended' from him were the only ones deemed worthy to rule the nation he had forged.

Originally born as Lucius Domitius Ahenbarbus, some believe that Nero was doomed to his later barbaric nature due to his parentage. His father, Gnaeus, was known as a dangerous and violent man who had been charged with treason, adultery and incest. It is said that when he was congratulated on the birth of his son, he proclaimed that anything born to him and his wife would be a "disaster".

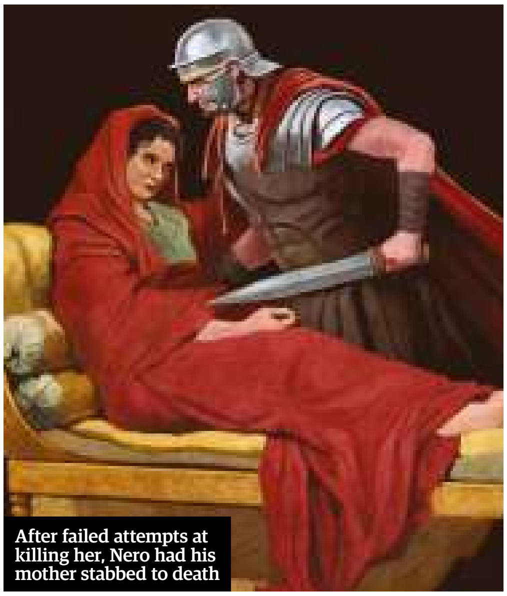
Gnaeus was dead before Nero would even remember him. Instead, it would be his mother who would play the most influential role in his life, and Gnaeus was right to doubt the purity of his wife. Agrippina was a woman forged in fire - she had lived to see her mother, Agrippina the Elder, and two of her brothers arrested, exiled and starved to death; she had been forced to marry a detestable man she loathed and she had been exiled by her own brother, Caligula.

It is no wonder that Agrippina had been forced to turn herself into steel to survive; she was done being passed around like a chess piece - she wanted control, and it started with marrying the emperor Claudius. Agrippina was a sly woman, well versed in the subtleties of the Roman court, and by using her web of political alliances, she found

herself married to Claudius - despite the fact he was her uncle.

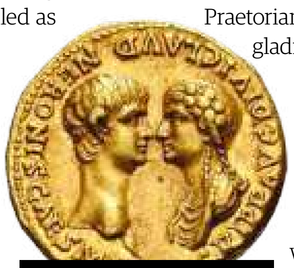
Although Claudius had his own son, Britannicus, he was still young in a society with high mortality rates, so 13-year-old Nero was swiftly made his heir. Agrippina couldn't be emperor herself; she was, after all, a woman. But she could control it so that her own son sat on the throne, and he was just an inexperienced youth who would easily bend to her will. To further solidify her son's position, she had him married to Octavia, Claudius' daughter.

However, it wasn't long after this that Claudius began to waver; he seemed to regret marrying Nero to his daughter and started to focus more on his own son, preparing him for the imperial throne. To regain control, Agrippina needed to act quickly. Ancient sources state that she poisoned her husband with a plate of mushrooms, while others suspect that Agrippina actually had nothing to do with Claudius' death. However, considering the timing of the emperor's demise, a natural death seems an all-too-convenient explanation.


After failed attempts at killing her, Nero had his mother stabbed to death

In 54 CE, before he could officially re-instate his own son as heir, Claudius passed away and the position of emperor fell to Nero. It is unknown if Nero played a part in the poisoning, or even if he was privy to the details, but it is peculiar that from then on, Nero proclaimed mushrooms to be "the food of the gods".

To the public, Nero was a welcome change. In fact, the early part of his reign was hailed as a golden age. Nero was obsessed with personal popularity - more than anything, he wanted to be liked. In his early years he abolished capital punishment, lowered taxes, gave more rights to slaves and gave aid to other cities. He loved the arts and he put on lavish games, concerts, chariot races and tournaments. To the people, it seemed that he was genuinely interested in being a good ruler, but it is likely he was still worried about the ever-looming threat of Claudius' true son claiming the throne. If the people liked him, then it was less likely they would support his rival. To Nero, popularity meant power.


Agrippina's influence can be seen from this coin that features her image alongside her son - a very rare occurrence

However, things at home were less than stable. Nero was only 17 when he became emperor, making him the youngest ever to assume the throne up until that point. His ascension not only transformed him into an emperor, but also into a man. While his mother's scheming and influence had been useful in the struggle for succession, now he was ruler he had his own ambitions, many of which did not involve her. Having a mother figure so strong and domineering was plainly frustrating to the ambitious young man, and, much to his mother's annoyance, he began to rely more on the guidance of his advisors. His advisors' opinions were clear - Agrippina wasn't to be trusted.

With the relationship souring, Nero purposely began to act out. He had long loathed the political marriage he had been forced into with Octavia and instead began an affair with a former slave. When his outraged mother found out and demanded he rid himself of her, Nero instead began living with her as his wife. It was a very unsubtle message - Nero wasn't a child anymore, and his mother didn't control him. Nero swiftly moved Agrippina out of the palace, denied her the protection of the Praetorian Guard and banned her from the gladiatorial contests.

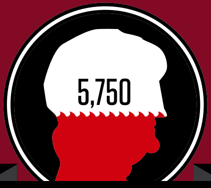
Agrippina, however, wasn't one to go down quietly. Finally realising that she had completely lost grip on a son who had inherited her own ruthless ambition, she turned her attention elsewhere, to the one other person who could claim the throne and reinstate her power - Britannicus. He was still a minor, but suddenly, in 55 CE, the day before he was due to be declared an adult, Claudius' true son died while at a banquet. Agrippina had taught her son two things: how to succeed, and how to kill - and now he was a master of both.

In 58 CE, Nero finally decided he was finished with his loveless marriage and declared his wish to marry another - Poppaea Sabina. However, his mother refused to stay quiet and she let her opposition to the divorce be heard clearly among the Roman population, who also did not wish Nero to divorce Octavia. Feeling his support waning and finally pushed to breaking point, Nero made a decision - it was time to rid himself of his interfering mother once and for all.

Nero's decision to kill his mother was not a sudden, rash one. It was thought out and planned down to the last detail. At first he had experts craft a device that could be affixed to her ceiling and would then crush her in her sleep. When that

5 MOST MURDEROUS EMPERORS

The men who ruled Rome with fear, blood and death

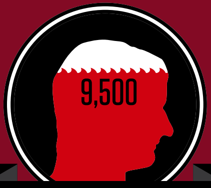


NERO

B.15 DEC 37 CE – D.9 JUN 68 CE

♛ 13 OCT 54 CE – 9 JUN 68 CE

Nero's tyrannical reputation is well earned - not only did he direct his murderous intents towards innocent Christians, beginning a tradition of torture and persecution that would last hundreds of years, but he also killed those closest to him.

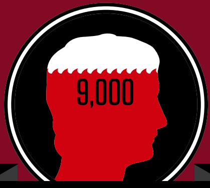


TIBERIUS

B.16 NOV 42 BCE – D.16 MAR 37 CE

♛ 18 SEP 14 CE – 16 MAR 37 CE

Accounts of Tiberius' murderous streak differ - some sources claim only four innocents died under his reign. However, others paint the picture of a ruthless emperor, killing anyone he suspected of plotting against him, leaving heaps of dead bodies in his wake.

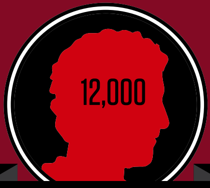


CALIGULA

B.31 AUG 12 CE – D.24 JAN 41 CE

♛ 18 MAR 37 CE – 24 JAN 41 CE

Death surrounded Caligula from an early age, with almost his entire family destroyed by Tiberius. Caligula was known to have an insatiable lust for power. Although we cannot verify them, there are many outrageous stories of murder and tyranny.

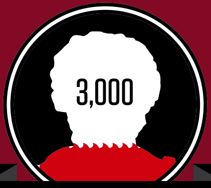


COMMODUS

B.31 AUG 161 – D.31 DEC 192

♛ 177 – 31 DEC 192

Rather than being a ruthless tyrant, Commodus is often painted as a figure of cowardice, easily influenced by men with dark intentions. It was repeated attempts upon his life that pushed the emperor to kill for almost no reason at all.

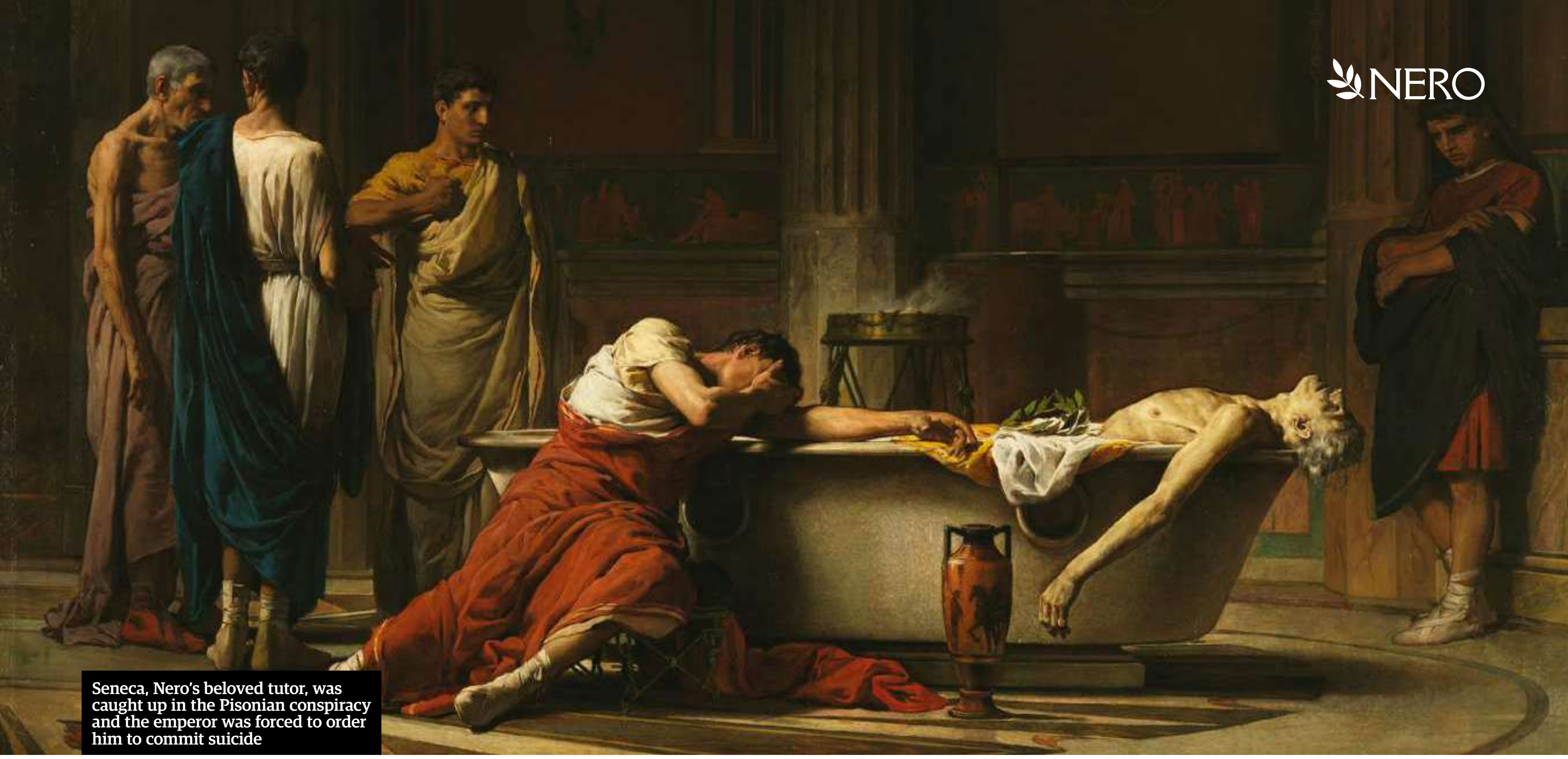


SEVERUS

B.11 APR 145 – D.4 FEB 211

♛ 14 APR 193 – 4 FEB 211

Severus claimed the throne through bloody means, deposing the previous emperor and waging war on his rivals. Soon his cruelty became renowned and he earned himself the nickname 'the Punic Sulla' in reference to the infamous dictator Sulla.



Seneca, Nero's beloved tutor, was caught up in the Pisonian conspiracy and the emperor was forced to order him to commit suicide

> "The same man who had abolished capital punishment began executing anyone who he suspected of conspiring against him"

proved too complicated, he opted for a boat made to sink. However, Agrippina escaped by swimming to shore. Finally, out of options, he returned to tradition and had her stabbed to death.

Shortly after Agrippina's murder, Nero began to change. Perhaps it was something to do with murdering his own mother that haunted his mind. Whether it was guilt or something animal within him being unleashed, the kind, fair ruler that the people loved seemed to vanish almost overnight. Nero had always been self-indulgent, but his hedonistic lifestyle became so over the top that it began to sicken the very people who had once loved him.

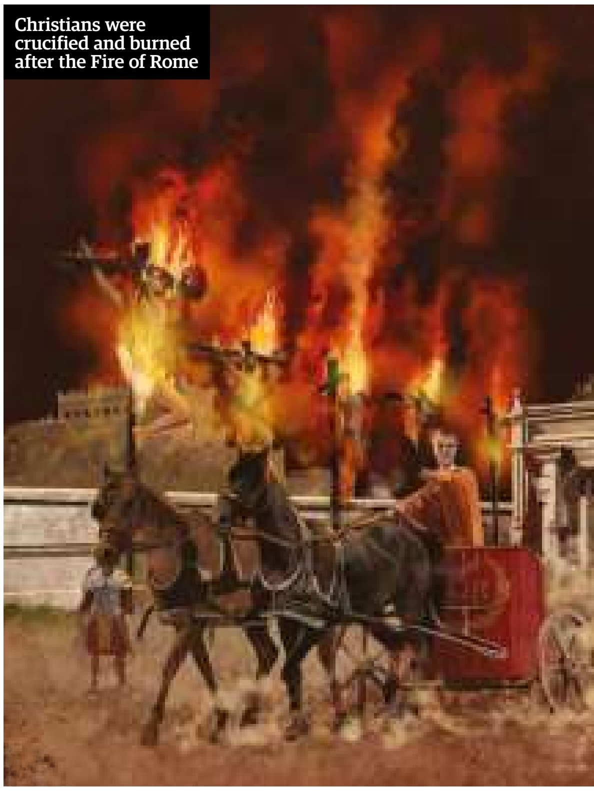
He spent an outrageous amount of money on himself and his artistic pursuits, and he began to give public performances, an action criticised as shameful by many ancient historians. He forbade anyone from leaving while he performed, and some likely inflated accounts write of women giving birth in the arena and men flinging themselves off the high walls to escape the boredom. If Nero had simply been a hedonistic ruler, that would not have been so terrible; he had always been lavish and craved the people's attention. Now he was cruel, too. This cruelty was directed at the woman he likely viewed as the last thorn in his side - his wife.

With nobody to oppose him, Nero divorced the nation's darling, Octavia, and banished her on grounds of infertility. This left him free to marry Poppaea, by that point heavily pregnant. Eventually Nero bowed to public protests and let Octavia return, but not for long. Officially her death was deemed a suicide, but the truth was a badly kept secret: Nero had ordered her execution. Her popularity was turning the public against him, therefore she had to be eliminated. As the people wept, the emperor had her head sent to his new wife as a gift.

The people of Rome were not idiots, and the sudden death of Octavia and swift remarriage had made many people suspect Nero's hidden murderous ways. Accusations of treason against the emperor began to emerge, but rather than heed this warning and lay low, he instead became more vicious than ever.

The same man who had abolished capital punishment began executing anyone who he suspected of conspiring against him. Eventually this cull extended to people who said any bad word about him; one commander was even executed for making a negative comment at a party. It is said that Nero was haunted by memories of his mother and wife, and the guilt transformed him into a bloodthirsty animal, killing without moderation or consideration. Although his murderous actions could be chalked up to rage and suspicion, it did mean one thing: Nero's rivals were eliminated.

Nero seemed to have decided that if he couldn't have power by popularity, then he would have power by dominance. Over this period, he slowly usurped authority from the Senate. Just ten years after promising senators power equivalent to that they had held under the republic, Nero had all but stripped them of their worth. To the emperor, this meant more power for him, but the Senate was also full of dangerous, ambitious men, and ignoring them would later prove his downfall.



Christians were crucified and burned after the Fire of Rome

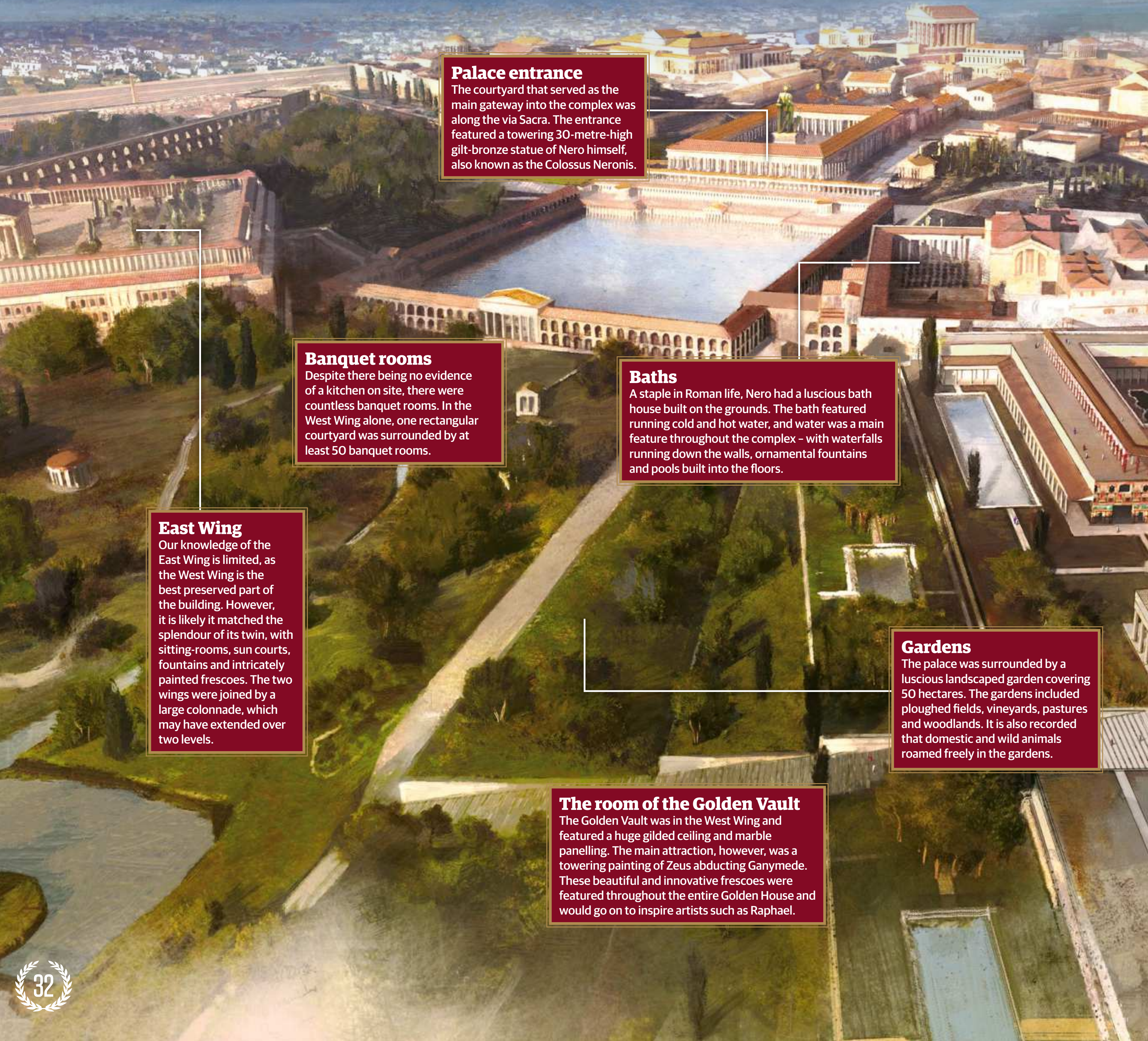
In 64 CE, something even more devastating than Nero's rage distracted the Roman public. A great fire consumed the city, destroying three districts, damaging seven and leaving thousands of citizens homeless. Accidental fires were not uncommon at the time, but a rumour soon sprung up that it was Nero himself who had started it in order to clear space for his new luxury complex, the Domus Aurea. Although it is impossible to confirm who ignited the fire, the fact that his subjects all believed Nero capable of starting it to benefit himself is indicative of how far the beloved emperor had fallen. Nero was quick to shift the blame, pointing the fingers at Christians, and in doing so began years of torture and persecution.

THE DOMUS AUREA

Nero's self-indulgence is no secret – the emperor did not shrink at the idea of spending enormous amounts on himself while his subjects suffered. After the great fire of 64 CE destroyed vast areas of land, Nero saw an opportunity to build the grandest palace the world had ever seen. Nero seized this land, actually owned by several aristocrats, and set about building his dream home: the Domus Aurea or 'Golden House'.

Enlisting the help of the celebrated architect Severus and the engineer Celer, Nero created a pleasure palace unlike any seen before. The vast complex included landscaped gardens, a huge man-made lake and an imperial retreat with 150 beautifully decorated rooms. Glimmering with delicate gold leaf, semi-precious stones and ivory, upon the project's completion Nero proclaimed, "Now I can begin to live like a human being."

After Nero's suicide just four years later, the lake was drained and vast areas of the palace were torn down by Vespasian, who also began constructing the Colosseum where the lake had stood. Baths were also later built on the land. It wasn't until the Renaissance that interest surrounding the remains was renewed – many famous painters explored the ruins, marvelled at the beauty and were inspired in their own work.



Palace entrance
The courtyard that served as the main gateway into the complex was along the via Sacra. The entrance featured a towering 30-metre-high gilt-bronze statue of Nero himself, also known as the Colossus Neronis.

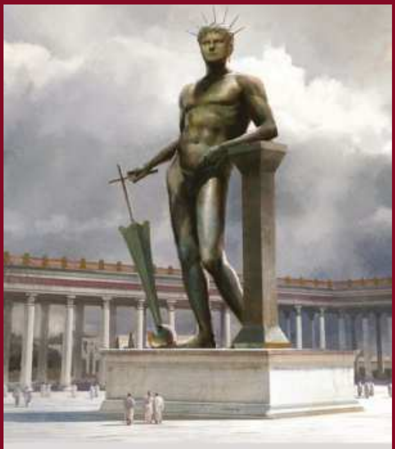
Banquet rooms
Despite there being no evidence of a kitchen on site, there were countless banquet rooms. In the West Wing alone, one rectangular courtyard was surrounded by at least 50 banquet rooms.

Baths
A staple in Roman life, Nero had a luscious bath house built on the grounds. The bath featured running cold and hot water, and water was a main feature throughout the complex – with waterfalls running down the walls, ornamental fountains and pools built into the floors.

East Wing
Our knowledge of the East Wing is limited, as the West Wing is the best preserved part of the building. However, it is likely it matched the splendour of its twin, with sitting-rooms, sun courts, fountains and intricately painted frescoes. The two wings were joined by a large colonnade, which may have extended over two levels.

Gardens
The palace was surrounded by a luscious landscaped garden covering 50 hectares. The gardens included ploughed fields, vineyards, pastures and woodlands. It is also recorded that domestic and wild animals roamed freely in the gardens.

The room of the Golden Vault
The Golden Vault was in the West Wing and featured a huge gilded ceiling and marble panelling. The main attraction, however, was a towering painting of Zeus abducting Ganymede. These beautiful and innovative frescoes were featured throughout the entire Golden House and would go on to inspire artists such as Raphael.



THE COLOSSUS OF NERO

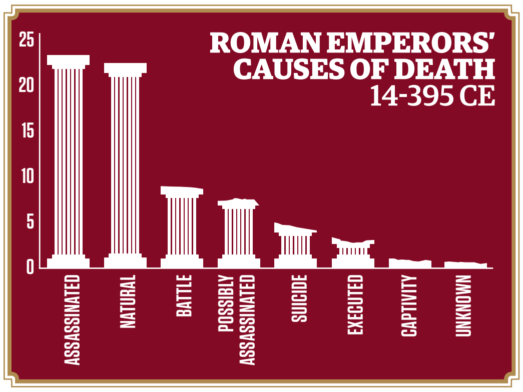
When Nero was building his Domus Aurea, he decided its crowning glory would be a huge, imposing bronze statue of himself. Designed by the Greek architect Zenodorus, this mammoth work of art took four years to construct. Sources differ on the statue's true height, but we can presume it was at least 30 metres tall.

After Nero's death, with public opinion of the emperor at an all time low, the statue was moved next to the Colosseum and Nero's face was replaced with that of the sun god. Emperor Commodus later altered it to his own face until, after his death, it was changed back. Today nothing remains of this sculpture except for its foundations.

Across Rome, Christians were arrested, devoured by dogs, crucified and burned. There are even accounts of Nero using oil-soaked Christians as torches in his gardens.

The public had been right about one thing: Nero did want to build his huge villa, and the newly cleared land made the perfect spot. However, after excessively spending on his own artistic pursuits, the emperor was running low on funds. In order to pay for his ambitious building project, he sold senior positions in public office to the highest bidders, raised taxes and took money from temples. Nero's frivolous spending had caused the currency to devalue for the first time in the empire's history, and to try to rebuild his funds, he reinstated a policy that allowed him to confiscate property from those suspected of treason.

For many people, this was the final straw. In 65 CE, a plot was hatched to assassinate Nero and place Piso, an aristocrat, in his place. However, the plot was discovered before it could be carried out. Many of the men involved were Nero's previous advisers and close friends, but Nero showed no restraint in having them all executed. Killing his enemies had worked very well for Nero so far, but that was when he only had a few rivals. Now almost all of Rome hated him, and he couldn't kill everyone.



Three years later, Gaius Julius Vindex, a governor, publicly rebelled against Nero's harsh tax policies. He was swiftly joined by another governor, Servius Sulpicius Galba. Although Gaius' forces were squashed and Gaius executed, Galba still lived, and as the main living force against Nero, he quickly gained support. Nero declared him a public enemy, but this seemed only to increase his follower numbers. Even the prefect of Nero's Praetorian Guard abandoned him and declared his allegiance to Galba. Many men who had likely been too scared to act alone saw this as their chance to finally raise their voices against the emperor and his greedy, ruthless ways, and Galba's support grew and grew.

Nero was self-indulgent and tyrannical, but he wasn't stupid. He knew it was time to run. He decided to flee east to the provinces that were still loyal to him. However, even his own officers refused to help him, quoting a line from Vergil's *Aeneid*: "Is it so dreadful a thing then to die?" Escape was too good for Nero. Disgrace was too kind to the man who had slaughtered and destroyed the lives of his people. Death was what the people, and his own men, craved.

Nero had no option but to return home to his palace, his last place of sanctuary. However, he struggled to sleep, and when he awoke, he found that the palace guard had also abandoned him. Anxious and panic stricken, he sent hasty messages to his friends' chambers, but no replies came. Even they had forsaken him. Nero had lost everything – his safety, his throne and his cherished popularity. He called for anyone adept with a sword to come and end his life, but nobody appeared, and his cries echoed in his empty palace: "Have I neither friend nor foe?"

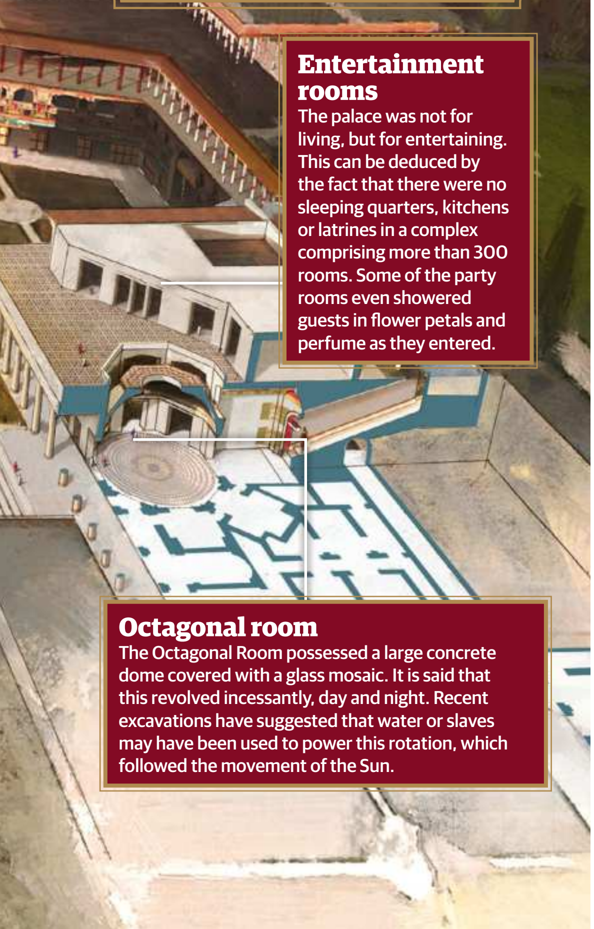
The emperor managed to escape to a villa six kilometres outside the city with four loyal freedmen, where he ordered them to dig a grave for him. Before it was finished, a message arrived – Nero had been declared a public enemy and the Senate was to execute him by beating. It is unlikely that this would have occurred; there was, after all, still some devotion to the Julio-Claudian family, of which Nero was the last in line. If there was no loyalty to Nero, the bloodline at least would give him a chance of survival.

Nero, however, did not see this. He had been abandoned by everyone, he had lost everything, and he was convinced his life was next. First he begged one of his companions to kill him, an act they refused to comply with, and then, upon hearing the horsemen approaching, he had no option but to take his own life. Even here he failed; consumed by fear, he forced his secretary to do the deed for him. Nero still lived as the horsemen entered, and he survived long enough to utter his last words as the men struggled to stop the bleeding: "Too late! This is fidelity!" On 9 June 68 CE, on the anniversary of Octavia's death, the last in the Julio-Claudian line was dead.

By the time he reached Rome, Galba had already been proclaimed emperor. As favoured as he was, Galba's reign would not be a peaceful one and he would be dead within a year. Nero had not been a good emperor, but with his ancient line dried up, chaos claimed the city and war waged.

Nero's legacy, however, would live on. To Christians he became a figure so rooted in pain and anguish that he took on the form of the Antichrist. A rumour began that Nero had not died at all and instead would return. This became a legend almost Christ-like in its retelling, surviving hundreds of years after his death, even into the 5th century, and at least three imposters proclaiming to be Nero led rebellions in his name.

Because of these things and the influence they had on historians, it is almost impossible to distinguish who Nero really was. Today he has taken on a super-villain status that increases with every retelling of his life. The real man behind the myth may be dead forever, but the spectre of Emperor Nero, and the pain he brought his people, flourishes to this day.



Entertainment rooms
The palace was not for living, but for entertaining. This can be deduced by the fact that there were no sleeping quarters, kitchens or latrines in a complex comprising more than 300 rooms. Some of the party rooms even showered guests in flower petals and perfume as they entered.

Octagonal room
The Octagonal Room possessed a large concrete dome covered with a glass mosaic. It is said that this revolved incessantly, day and night. Recent excavations have suggested that water or slaves may have been used to power this rotation, which followed the movement of the Sun.

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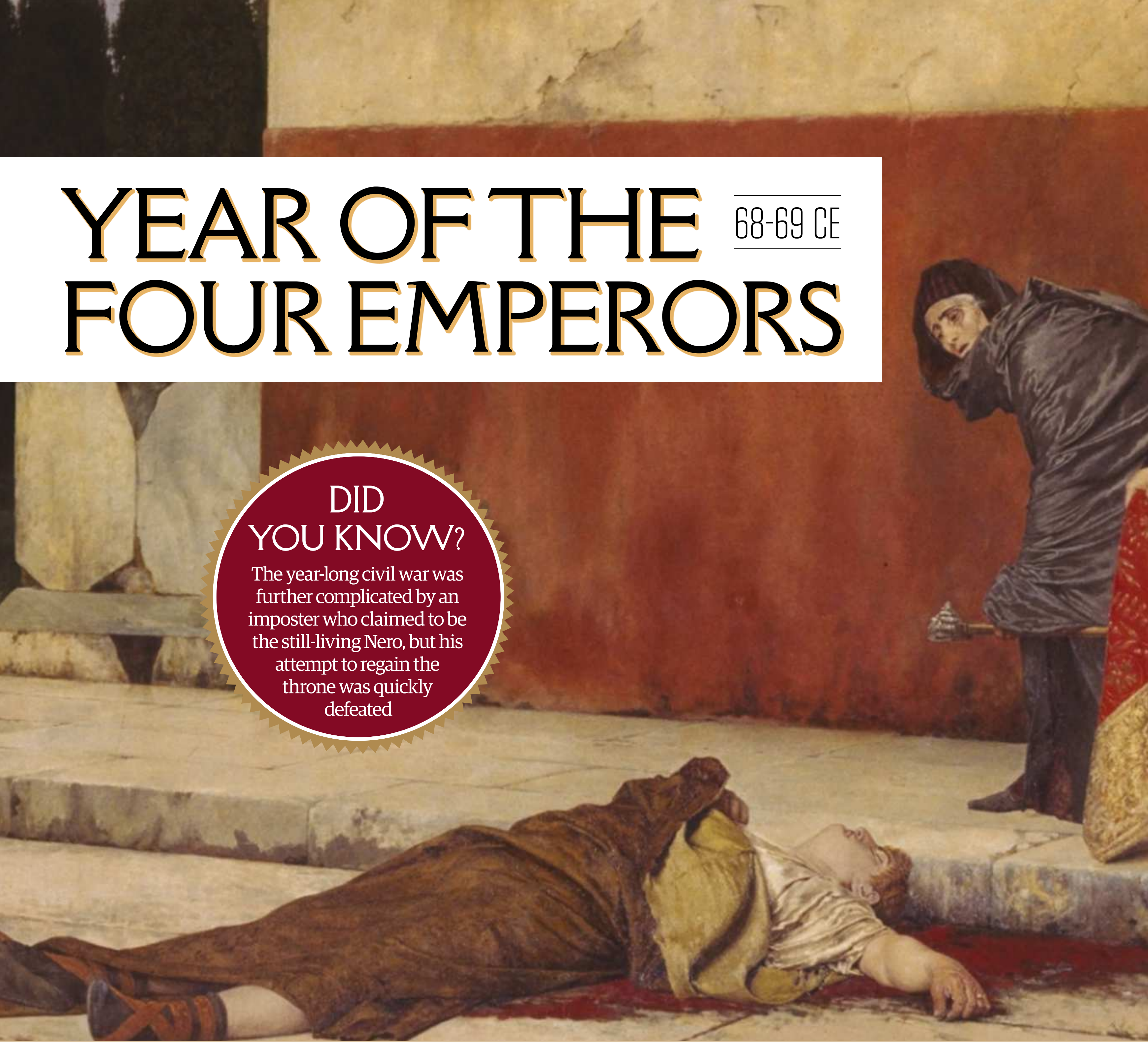
YEAR OF THE FOUR EMPERORS

68-69 CE



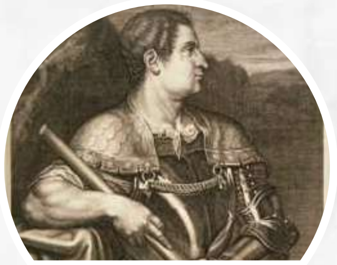
DID YOU KNOW?

The year-long civil war was further complicated by an imposter who claimed to be the still-living Nero, but his attempt to regain the throne was quickly defeated

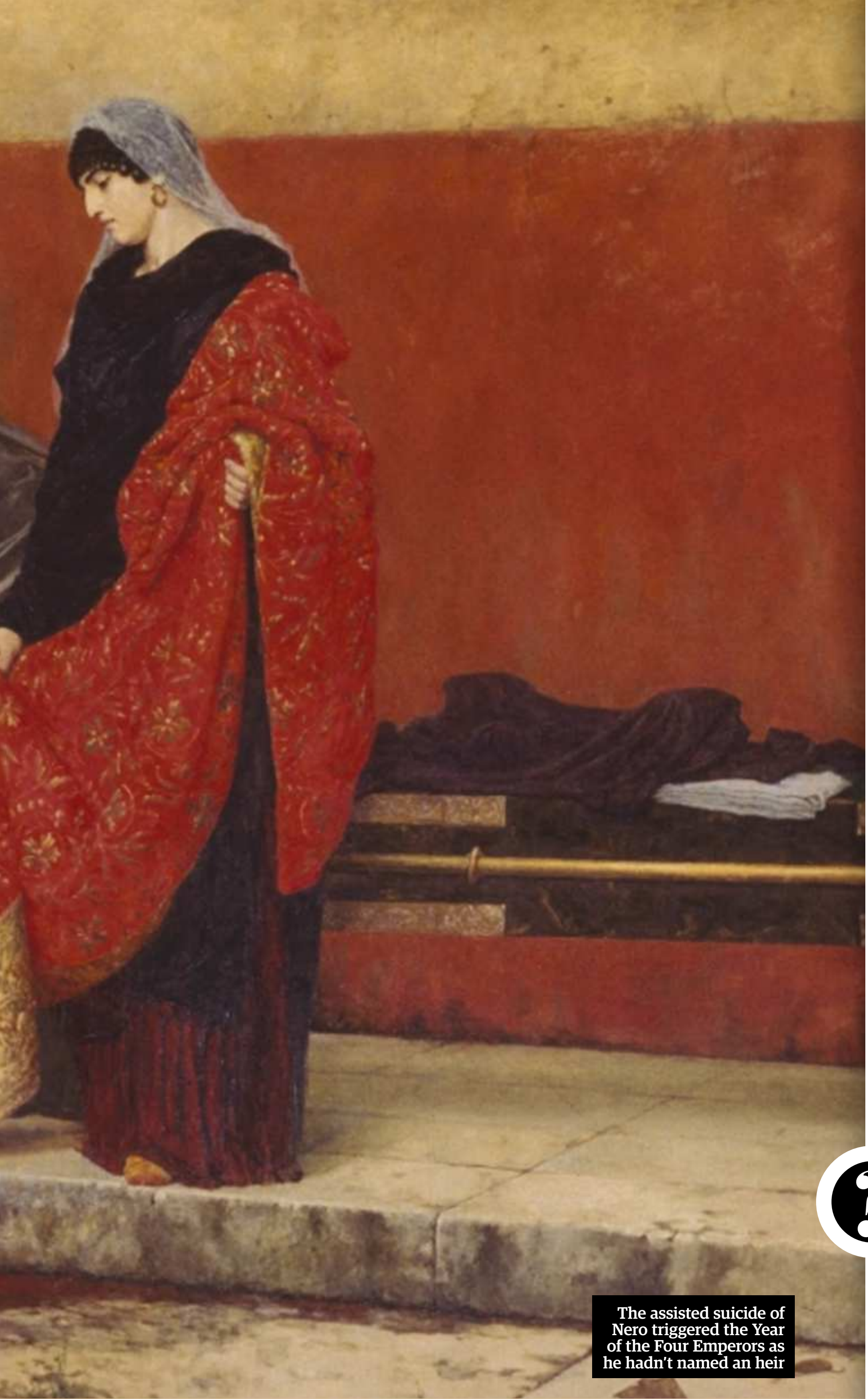
9 June 68 CE
Nero orders his secretary to kill him, bringing to an end the 95-year rule of the Julio-Claudian dynasty.

15 January 69 CE
Galba is hacked down by soldiers of the Praetorian Guard who had turned against him and backed Otho instead.

Early 69 CE
Vitellius is proclaimed emperor by his armies at Cologne, probably before news of Otho's coup reaches them.



16 April 69 CE
Otho chooses to commit suicide after defeat in battle by Vitellius, despite being urged to carry on by his officers.



The assisted suicide of Nero triggered the Year of the Four Emperors as he hadn't named an heir

The suicide of Nero in 68 CE may have brought an end to one of the most infamous imperial reigns in history, but it also resulting in the collapse of the rule of the Julio-Claudian dynasty. With no male member of the family left who could claim to be an heir to Julius Caesar and Augustus, Rome was faced with a power vacuum and the army imploded as its generals led a series of coups and counter-coups.

The first to make a move was Galba, a wealthy noble who was governor of Hispania Tarraconensis. He marched on Rome upon hearing of Nero's suicide and was acclaimed emperor, but demonstrated a level of paranoia that rivalled his predecessor. Galba's supporters quickly deserted him as he summarily executed opponents and undid the few popular reforms enacted by Nero.

After only seven months, Galba was killed by soldiers of the Praetorian Guard, who hailed another provincial governor as his replacement. However, Otho - the governor of Lusitania and a former ally of Galba - managed only three months in charge until he was in turn defeated by Vitellius, commander of the army in Germania Inferior, who had marched on Rome from the north.

Vitellius became the third emperor in ten months, but the armies in the east had proclaimed yet another candidate for the imperial title. Their choice was Vespasian, a renowned military commander who had seen action during the invasion of Britain and been sent to Judaea to quash a Jewish revolt.

Legions supporting Vespasian entered Italy and defeated Vitellius, who was killed and thrown in the Tiber. Although he faced further rebellions and threats to his position, Vespasian secured his grip on power - the last emperor standing in a short-lived but vicious civil war.

WHO WAS INVOLVED?

GALBA

3 BCE - 69 CE

At the age of 71, Galba was the oldest emperor to date and lacked the energy to maintain power.

OTHO

32-69 CE

Otho turned against his former ally Galba after he was passed over as the emperor's chosen successor.

VITELLIUS

15-69 CE

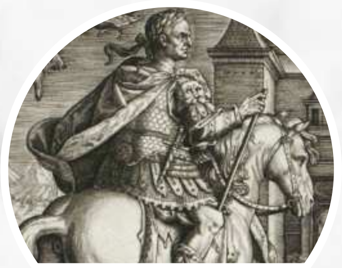
Vitellius tried to resign as emperor when faced with Vespasian's rebellion but was prevented by the Praetorian Guard.

VESPASIAN

9-79 CE

Vespasian came from an undistinguished family but rose through the ranks on the back of a successful military career.

24 October 69 CE
Vespasian's allies win the Second Battle of Bedriacum, opening the way for them to enter Rome and depose Vitellius.



Summer 70 CE
Vespasian finally reaches Rome, having subdued a revolt in Egypt while his allies secured the imperial throne for him.

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Under Vespasian and his sons, the Roman Empire entered a new golden age after years of instability

THE FLAVIANS

Inside the dynasty whose time on the throne may have been short but ended the 1st century with a bang

Written by Scott Reeves

The Flavian dynasty was short-lived, lasting only 27 years across the reigns of three emperors. It was born in civil war, ended in assassination and was witness to fire, eruption and plague. Yet, despite the many problems they had to overcome, the Flavians successfully quelled the chaos of the later Julio-Claudian years and laid a solid foundation that would allow the Roman Empire to survive for another 200 years.

Vespasian's priority upon taking power was to consolidate support and retain the throne for more than a few months - something his three immediate predecessors had failed to do. The emperors of the Julio-Claudian dynasty could claim legitimacy through their familial and adoptive links to Julius Caesar and Augustus, but Vespasian was merely the general who had outlasted the other contenders in the Year of the Four Emperors that followed Nero's death.

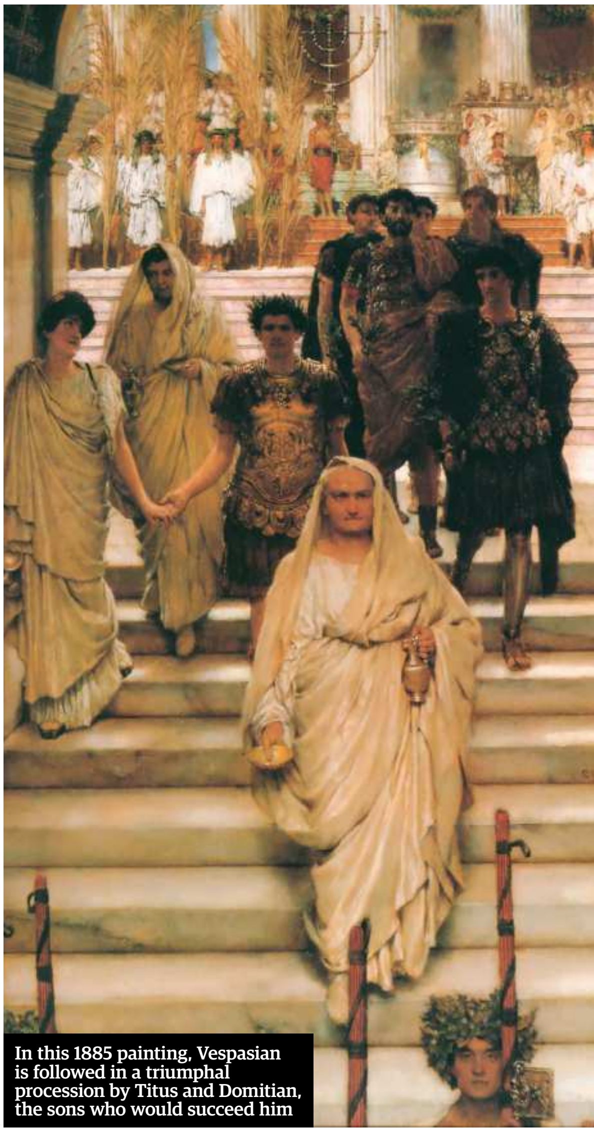
In Rome, the new emperor quickly sidelined his opponents by restructuring the ranks of the senatorial and equestrian classes, promoting those he could trust. Soldiers who fought on the side of his predecessor Vitellius were dismissed, replaced by Vespasian's loyal legionaries. Vespasian constantly reminded the public of his military victories in an attempt to bolster his popularity, rewarding those who wrote about his campaigns.

Considering the upheaval of the civil war, Vespasian's transformation from general to emperor was surprisingly tranquil. Only one major rebellion occurred, led by an officer in Gaul and Germania who claimed to be the great-grandson of Julius Caesar. The revolt was put down within a year by Vespasian's brother-in-law, Quintus Petillius Cerialis, while Vespasian's son Titus continued the suppression of the Judean revolt, bringing to an end the campaign that Vespasian was fighting upon being acclaimed emperor.

Aware that territorial expansion was the best way to ensure the empire remained affluent, Vespasian ordered Gnaeus Julius Agricola to Britannia with orders to push back the northern frontier. Vespasian's interest in the distant island province came from past experience - more than three decades before he had taken part in the invasion of Britain at the head of Legio II Augusta, subduing and conquering most of the southwest and setting up his headquarters at Exeter.

> "One rebellion occurred, led by an officer in Gaul and Germania who claimed to be the great-grandson of Julius Caesar"

Vespasian spent the spoils of war seized in Britannia and Judaea on a number of building projects in Rome designed to increase his popularity. He expanded the Temple of Peace and Temple of Claudius and erected a large statue to Apollo, grand monuments that gave an impression his rule was blessed by the gods, but Vespasian also catered to his people's base needs. Aware that an entertained Roman population was less likely to complain about his rule, Vespasian quickly dismissed Nero's plans for the construction of a



In this 1885 painting, Vespasian is followed in a triumphal procession by Titus and Domitian, the sons who would succeed him private imperial retreat next to the Forum and instead ordered the building of a vast amphitheatre to hold public games. However, the emperor died as the structure reached the third story, famously declaring "I think I'm becoming a god" when the end was nigh.

Under the Flavians - top to bottom, Vespasian, Titus and Domitian - the economy stabilised and thrived

Instead, the opening of the Colosseum - the Flavian dynasty's most famous legacy - occurred during the short reign of Vespasian's son Titus. It was the first time the imperial title had passed from a father to his son rather than to an extended or adopted family member. Vespasian had deliberately groomed his son for the succession, hoping that he would be the next ruler from a long and mighty dynasty. Titus had already been awarded a triumph for conquering Jerusalem and ending the Judaean revolt. He also commanded the Praetorian Guard and was appointed consul seven times during Vespasian's ten-year reign.

Titus may have been emperor during the massive games built to mark the opening of the Colosseum, but it appeared there was little to celebrate. On 24 October 79 CE, only four months after Vespasian's death, Mount Vesuvius erupted, destroying the cities of Pompeii and Herculaneum and killing thousands of people. Titus was quick to respond, sending two former consuls to coordinate the relief effort and personally visiting the area twice.

While the emperor was absent from the capital on his second visit to the eruption zone in 80 CE, a second disaster struck - a fire broke out in Rome, destroying many notable buildings including the Pantheon, Temple of Jupiter, Theatre of Pompey and Saepta Julia. Then, as the ravaged city recovered, plague tore through its streets. As in the case of the volcanic eruption, Titus paid money from the imperial treasury to help recover and rebuild after the natural disasters.

A final tragedy struck the empire shortly after the inaugural games at the Colosseum, when Titus contracted a fever and died. He had been emperor for just over two years, a reign marked by both catastrophe and celebration, and was succeeded by his younger brother, Domitian. As a second son, Domitian was less prepared to take power since the positions he held during his father's reign were largely ceremonial. However, he was acclaimed emperor by the Praetorian Guard the day after his brother's death and quickly established himself as a shrewd political operator.

Unlike every previous emperor dating back to Augustus, Domitian made little attempt to disguise the reality of imperial power. He sidelined the Senate, removing most of its decision-making powers and executing at least 20 senators over his 15-year reign. By dispensing with the long-standing façade that Rome was a republic and overtly moving power to the imperial court and his own appointees, Domitian made it possible for the emperor to personally supervise every aspect of government. He issued edicts and oversaw an efficient and effective imperial bureaucracy. Domitian's actions inevitably won him many enemies among Rome's political classes, but he ensured his popularity with the masses through congiaria (huge donations of grain made to the population of Rome) and by funding the Capitoline Games in a purpose-built stadium located in the Campus Martius.

With greater political power at his disposal, Domitian enacted a series of economic reforms.

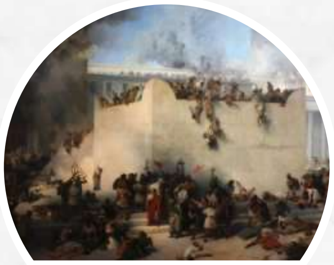
FASTER, HIGHER, STRONGER, DEADER

Grab your ticket for the inaugural games at the Flavian Amphitheatre

The opening of the Colosseum followed the standard format of Roman games: animal entertainments in the morning, the execution of criminals at midday and gladiator fights and battle re-enactments in the afternoon. Where the Flavian games differed, however, was in their scale. Up to 9,000 animals were killed over the 100-day celebration; an elephant that won a battle with a bull reputedly bowed to the emperor. The most famous fight was that between two gladiators, Verus and Priscus, whose long fight to exhaustion saw them both granted freedom by the emperor.

The Colosseum, or Flavian Amphitheatre, began life as a gigantic triumphal monument

The Flavians take power
Vespasian finally enters Rome, months after being acclaimed emperor and defeating Vitellius in battle.
70 CE



Triumph of Vespasian and Titus
Father and son are honoured by the people of Rome for their parts in conquering Jerusalem and quashing the Judaean revolt.
71 CE

Work begins on the Colosseum
The first foundations are dug for the Colosseum, the amphitheatre that would come to symbolise the Flavian dynasty at its peak.
72 CE

Vesuvius erupts
A volcanic eruption begins the reign of Titus in disastrous fashion, although the emperor is commended for his role in the relief effort.
79 CE

Vespasian and Titus had already increased imperial income through taxation - including a urine tax levied on public toilets - but Domitian set up a rigorous tax collection system. He ensured that the treasury remained full and the economy balanced despite a building programme that rivalled that of Augustus. Fire damage at the Temple of Jupiter was repaired, while another level was added to the Colosseum. A palace was built on the Palantine Hill, while the Temple of Vespasian and Titus was built and dedicated to Domitian's now-deified father and brother. A sign of Domitian's thriving economy was his revaluation of Roman coinage, which had been steadily devalued over the past decades. Domitian initially revalued it back to the level under Augustus, then amended it to the pre-civil war value under Nero.

Where Domitian did not live up to the high standard set by his father and brother was in the military sphere. Although he claimed successes in Germania and Dacia early in his reign, both provinces would continue to pose a problem - the governor of Germania Superior would rebel in 89 CE, while a standard of the Praetorian Guard was captured in Dacia in 86 CE. Agricola was recalled from the governorship of Britannia in 85 CE, possibly because his victories outshone those of his emperor.

On 18 September 96 CE, Domitian was approached at his desk by a servant named Stephanus, who had worn a bandage on his arm for several days due to a supposed injury. Suddenly pulling a dagger from the bandage, Stephanus lurched forwards and stabbed Domitian in the groin. The emperor fought back, fatally wounding his assailant with the same dagger, but he eventually succumbed to further injuries when three or four further attackers joined in to finish the murder.

Whether the assassination was organised or improvised is unclear, but it the plot probably arose from Domitian's sidelined enemies in the Senate. He was replaced by a little-known politician named Nerva who would presumably be more willing to deal with the Senate. The senators, for their part, reacted to the assassination by passing an act of damnatio memoriae: Domitian's reign was condemned to oblivion by erasing his name from public records, coins bearing his likeness were removed from circulation, statues and monuments to him were torn down. It was a post-mortem insult to the emperor whose heavy-handed wielding of imperial power had marginalised them.

Domitian's reign may have ended at the point of a dagger, but he was far more successful than his assassination may suggest. While he was a tyrant, like his father and brother he was an efficient and effective ruler of an ever-growing empire. The Flavian dynasty came to power at a time when the future of the empire itself was teetering on the edge of collapse after Julio-Claudian misrule and civil war. Despite facing natural disasters, Vespasian, Titus and Domitian all managed to stabilise the empire and they led it into a long period of renaissance and prosperity under their successors, the Nerva-Antonines.

WHAT HAPPENED NEXT?

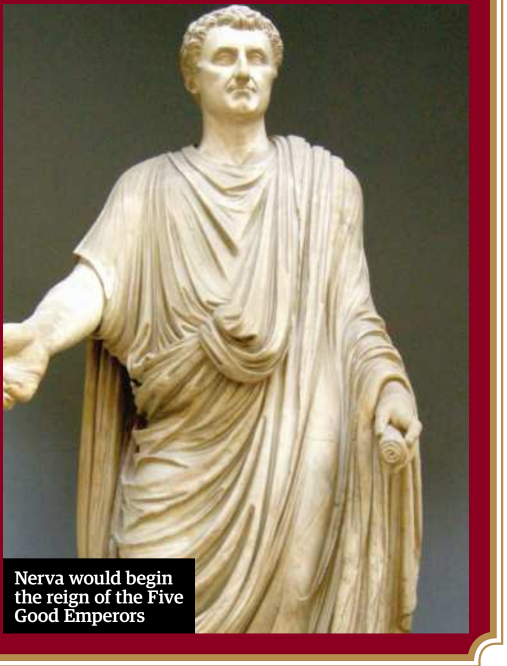
The end of the Flavians saw the birth of a new dynasty

After Domitian's murder, there was no gap between emperors - Nerva seemed ready to swoop in and save the day. Was he privy to the plot to assassinate Domitian? Most likely. The Senate didn't bat an eyelid as he took power, and it was the beginning of happier times.

Even though Nerva only ruled for two years, he is generally viewed as the first of the Five Good Emperors. The Senate gave him honorific of pater patriae, or father of the country, and statues of Domitian were destroyed. It was the end of his tyranny and the beginning of a new government.

But not everyone was on board. The army and the Praetorian Guard had been happy with the old regime, and Domitian had given them a nice pay rise - the first since Augustus' reign. In 97 CE, the Praetorian Guard staged a mutiny and Nerva was imprisoned in the imperial palace. While he was unharmed, not having the support of the army wasn't great for the leader of a state that was known for its military prowess. Fearing for his life and with no heirs of his own, Nerva adopted the governor of Upper Germany, the man who would become Trajan, as his heir.

While Nerva only ruled for about 16 months, he is remembered for stabilising the empire after the tumultuous reign of Domitian. He also managed to fit a fair few building projects into that time, repairing the Colosseum, roads and aqueducts, and allotting more land to the poor. When he died, it wasn't because of assassination - Nerva had been ill when he took the imperial throne, and he never got better. His adoption of Trajan would spark new life in the Pax Romana, a period of stability in the Roman Empire, and it would be just under a century before another tyrant would plunge Rome into civil war once more.


Nerva would begin the reign of the Five Good Emperors

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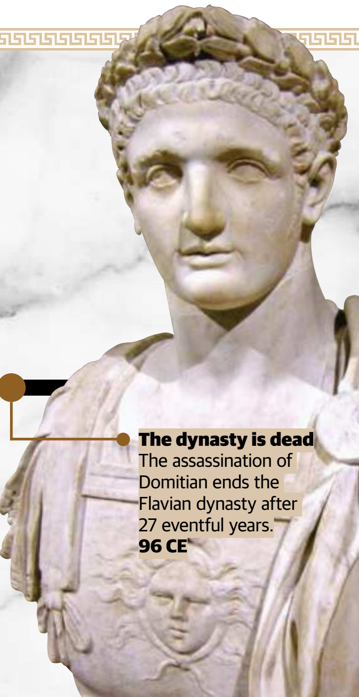
Flavian Games
Titus finally has something to celebrate with the opening of the Colosseum, but he is dead within weeks.
81 CE

A rival is sidelined
Agricola is recalled from his successful campaign in Britannia and enters a quiet retirement, possibly at the request of Domitian himself.
85 CE

Temple of Vespasian and Titus
Domitian honours the memory of his deified father and brother when a temple dedicated to them is completed.
87 CE



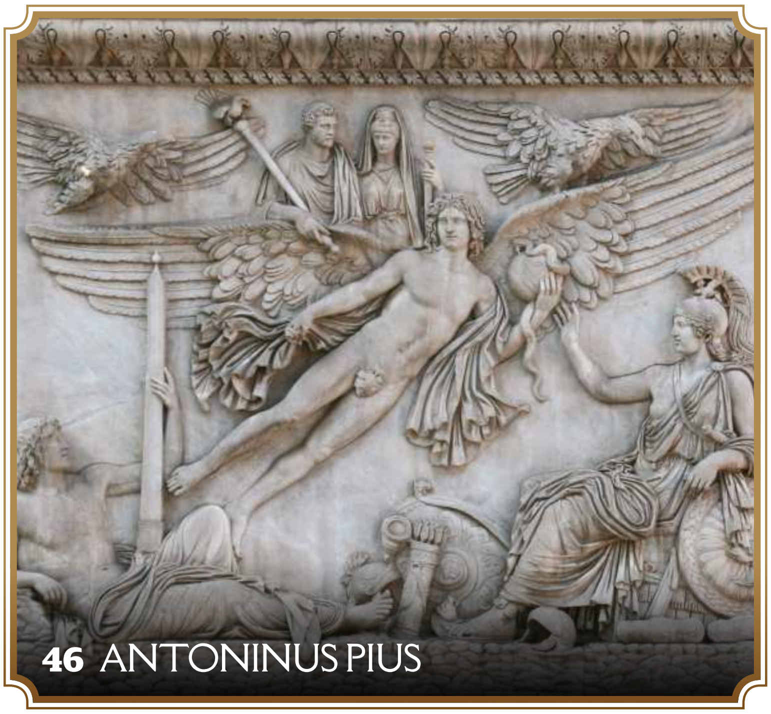
The dynasty is dead
The assassination of Domitian ends the Flavian dynasty after 27 eventful years.
96 CE

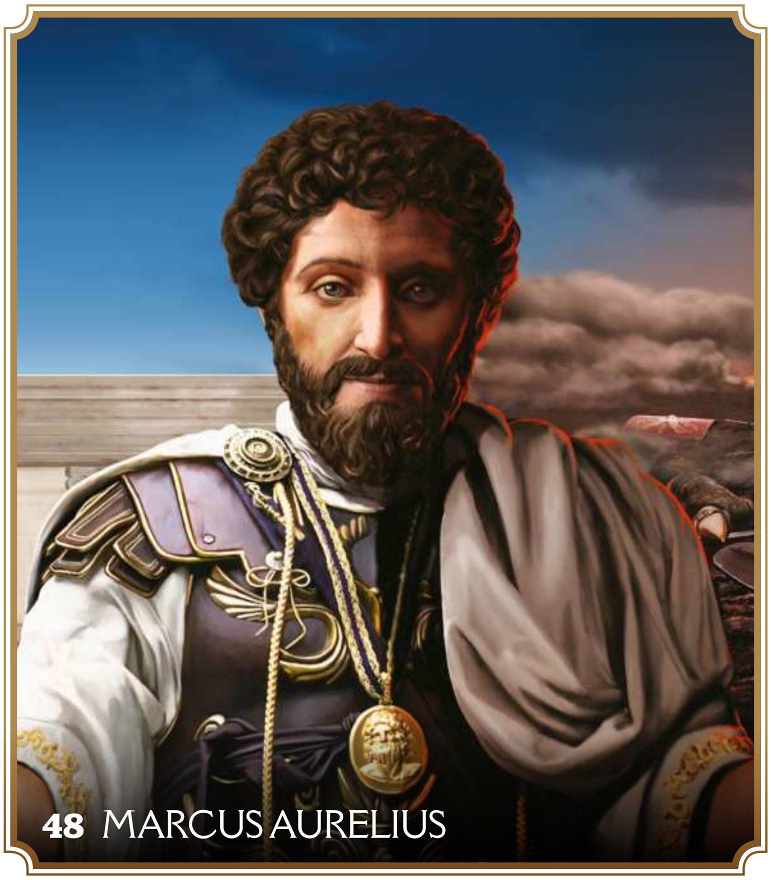
2ND CENTURY

As the Pax Romana comes to a close, uncover the Five Good Emperors and the man who ended the peace

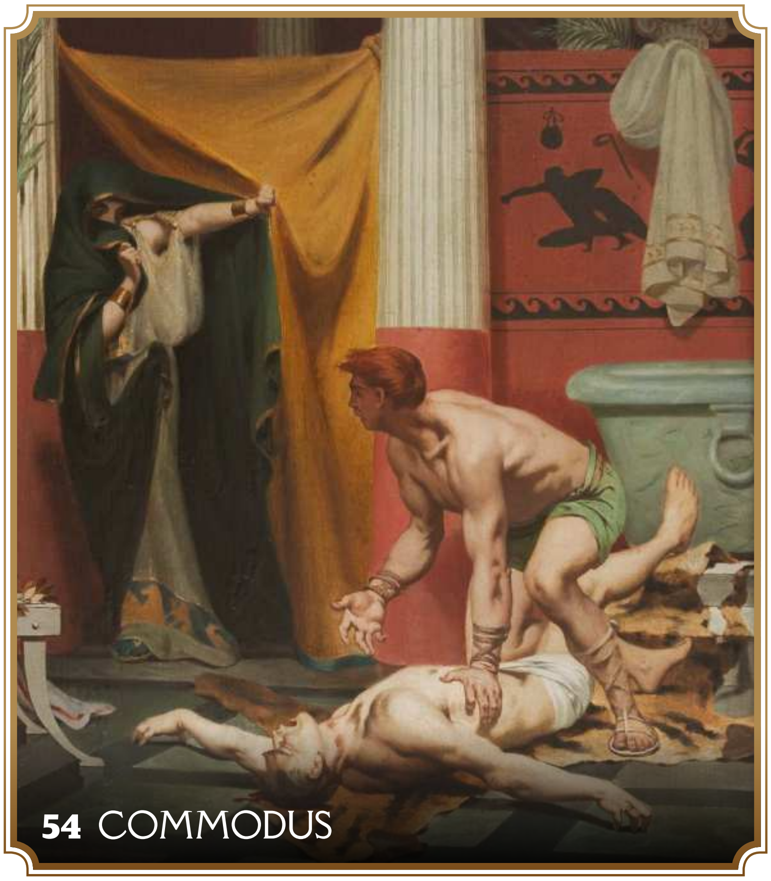
42 TRAJAN

44 HADRIAN


46 ANTONINUS PIUS



48 MARCUS AURELIUS



54 COMMODUS

58 YEAR OF THE FIVE EMPERORS

TRAJAN

98-117 CE

It was under the watchful eye of Emperor Trajan that the Roman Empire reached the largest it would ever be. The borders grew and grew, with the realm now stretching from Scotland to modern-day Iraq, and the bounties brought back funded a new forum in Rome, pictured here, as well as Trajan's Column, which memorialises the victory in the Dacian Campaign. The second of Rome's Five Good Emperors, he was the first of the empire's leaders to be born outside of the Italian peninsula and he has been described by the Roman historian Cassius Dio as "most conspicuous for his justice, for his bravery, and for the simplicity of his habits" – a glowing comment if ever there was one.

© Getty Images

117-138 CE

HADRIAN

Meet the emperor who turned the Roman Empire from conquest to consolidation

Written by Scott Reeves

When the death of his father left ten-year-old Publius Aelius Hadrianus an orphan, it was the beginning of a remarkable series of fortuitous events that would end in the boy reaching the highest rank in Ancient Rome. Young Hadrian was named a ward of his father's cousin, a rising army officer named Trajan. Just over a decade later, as Hadrian was beginning his own career, Trajan was named the successor of Emperor Nerva and over the next 20 years, Hadrian's public service saw him serve in the army and hold a number of political offices.

When Trajan succumbed to illness in August 117, the now-41-year-old Hadrian was told that he had been adopted by the emperor on his deathbed and named as his heir. Doubts of his legitimacy arose almost immediately: the adoption document was signed by Trajan's wife rather than the emperor himself; the servant who had stayed at Trajan's side during his final hours had conveniently died soon after his master; and four leading senators and potential rivals were summarily executed by the Praetorian Guard.

Hadrian was absent from Rome during the machinations that resulted in his succession. He returned from the east to claim the crown, but he did not stay long. Unlike previous emperors, who tended to live in the capital unless leading a military campaign, Hadrian's 21-year reign saw near-incessant travelling throughout the empire.

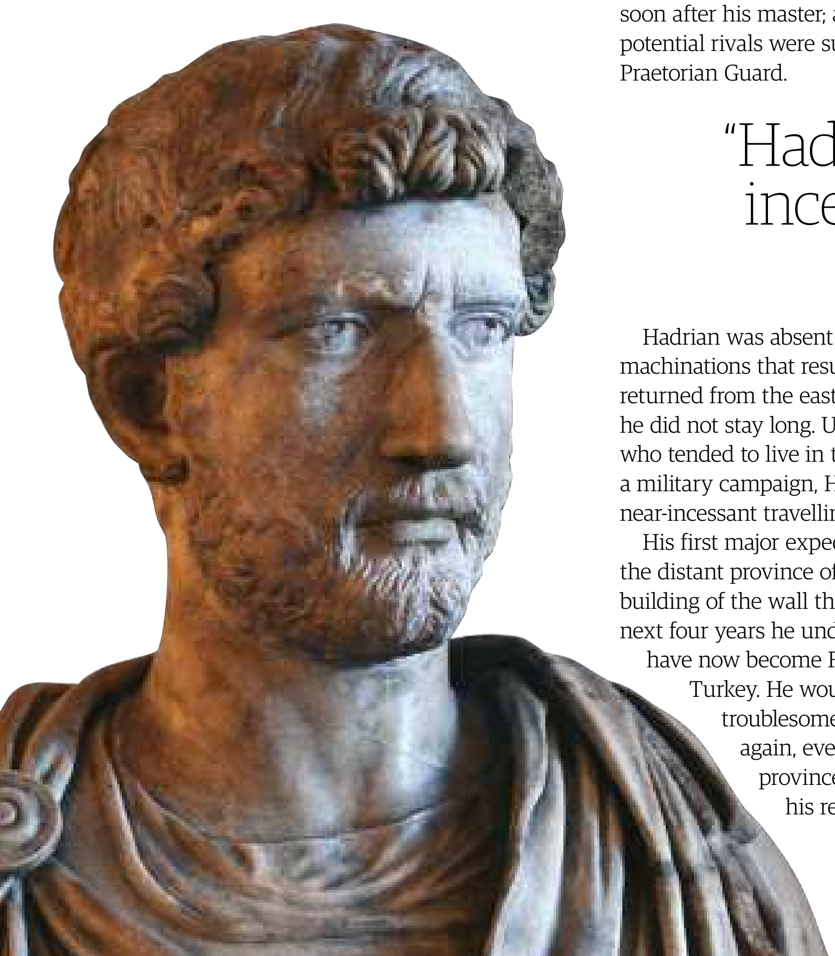
His first major expedition saw him survey the distant province of Britannia and order the building of the wall that bears his name. Over the next four years he undertook similar trips to what have now become France, Spain, Algeria and Turkey. He would return to Greece and the troublesome eastern frontier time and again, eventually visiting almost every province during his reign.

Hadrian was supervising a distinct shift in Roman foreign policy. No more was the empire to be one of conquest; instead it was to be one of cosmopolitan assimilation. Trajan's expansionist ambitions in Mesopotamia were abandoned, with Hadrian choosing to secure the borders of the empire instead. Aside from Hadrian's Wall, he built fortifications along the Rhine and Danube.

Compared with his predecessors, Hadrian's reign was remarkably peaceful, with only the Bar Kokhba Revolt in Judaea giving military officers a chance to test themselves in action. Instead, Hadrian looked to improve the existing provinces he had inherited. Rather than imposing colonies of Roman citizens on far-flung territories, Hadrian ordered the creation of semi-autonomous provincial towns governed by the locals. In Rome itself, he rebuilt the Pantheon and constructed the Temple of Venus and Roma, the largest temple in the capital. He may have ordered the repair of war damage in the wealthy Serapeum of Alexandria, and constructed a number of opulent temples and buildings in Athens.

Hadrian's relationship with the Senate was testy, stemming from the suspicious nature of his succession, and he had two more senators executed for an alleged plot in 137. However, when he died the following year, Hadrian's chosen heir – Antoninus Pius – inherited a largely stable empire that Hadrian had transformed from one of aggressive expansion into one of peaceful consolidation.

> "Hadrian's 21-year reign saw near-incessant travelling throughout the empire"



Hadrian is perhaps most remembered for his wall that marked the northernmost border of the empire. Parts of it still stand today

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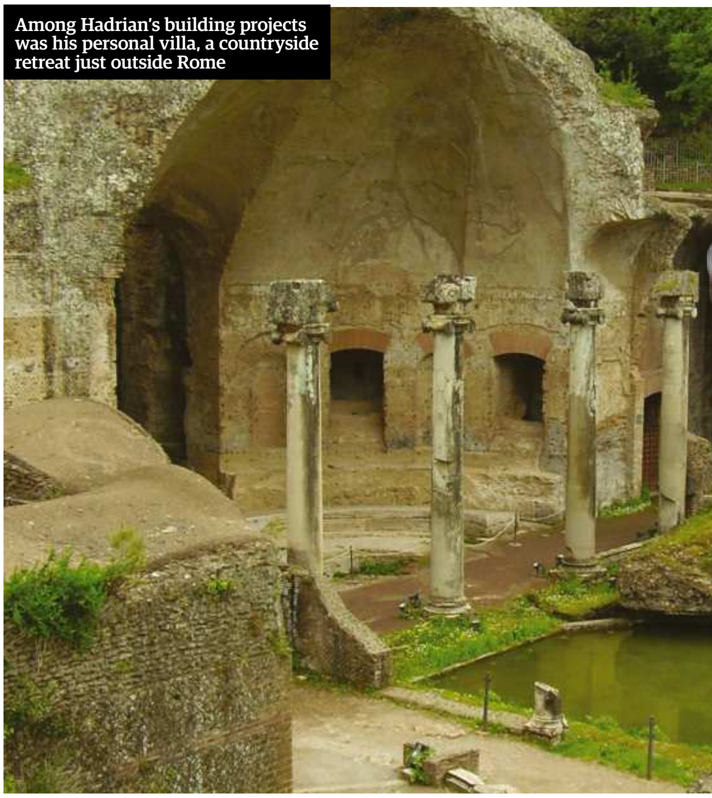
THE GAY EMPEROR

The love of Hadrian's life was not his childless wife but a Greek boy called Antinous. They first met when Hadrian was around 48 and Antinous was just 12. Pederasty – a sexual relationship between a man and a boy – was a common practice in Greece, but less recognised in Rome.

Antinous joined Hadrian on his journeys through the empire but drowned in an Egyptian river at the age of 18, possibly an accident, possibly a deliberate act of suicide or murder. The devastated emperor immediately declared that his young companion had become a god and spent the rest if his life mourning his loss.

The emperor and his lover captured in marble at the British Museum



Among Hadrian's building projects was his personal villa, a countryside retreat just outside Rome

Despite becoming emperor at 41, Hadrian's 21-year reign was the fourth-longest of the Principate

ANTONINUS PIUS

138-161 CE

Antoninus (depicted in the centre) wasn't born with the name 'Pius' – that was added during his time at the helm of one of the world's greatest empires. The consul-turned-emperor was insistent that his predecessor be given the divine honours that were due to him, and when his wife Faustina died, he founded a charity in her name – the Puellae Faustinianae – for the daughters of the poor. Militarily, Antoninus Pius' reign was an odd time for the always-battle-ready Romans as not much happened. A rebellion was quashed in Britannia and the Antonine Wall was built 100 miles north of Hadrian's Wall to extend the Roman boundary, but the peace would end soon after Antoninus' death.

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161-180 CE

MARCUS AURELIUS

It's time to re-examine the legacy that the last of the Five Good Emperors has left behind

Written by Katharine Marsh

War raged on the Danube in the 170s CE. On one side were the Celtic tribes, who had launched a threatening invasion over the river and into Roman territory. On the other side were the fearsome Roman legions, an imposing force with their military discipline and ruthless training. At their head was one of the co-emperors, Marcus Aurelius, the man who brought them to the cusp of victory before his death. But when he wasn't leading his troops, he had time to kill in Germany.

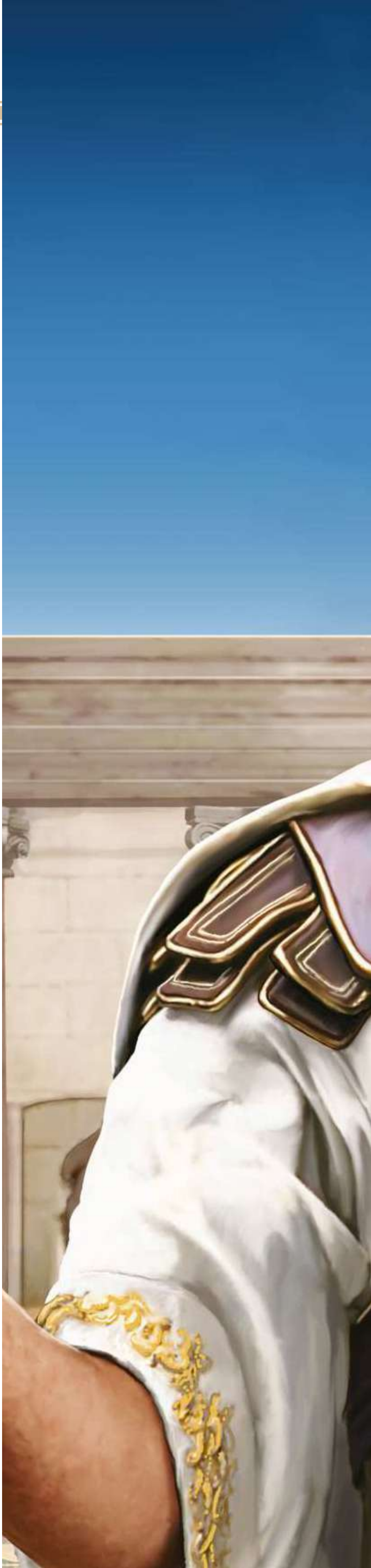
It's at this time, when Marcus was leading his troops in the Marcomannic Wars in 166-180 CE that it's thought he wrote *Meditations*, the work he has since become famous for. When people think of the emperor now, they don't remember his time at war. They don't recall his leadership of his nation through drought and plague. Everyone knows Marcus as the philosopher-king, the Stoic who became the last of the so-called Five Good Emperors before, in Edward Gibbon's eyes, Commodus took over and precipitated the empire's downfall. After almost 2,000 years, it's the philosophy we remember. But is it fair to shoehorn such a complex character into such a small box?

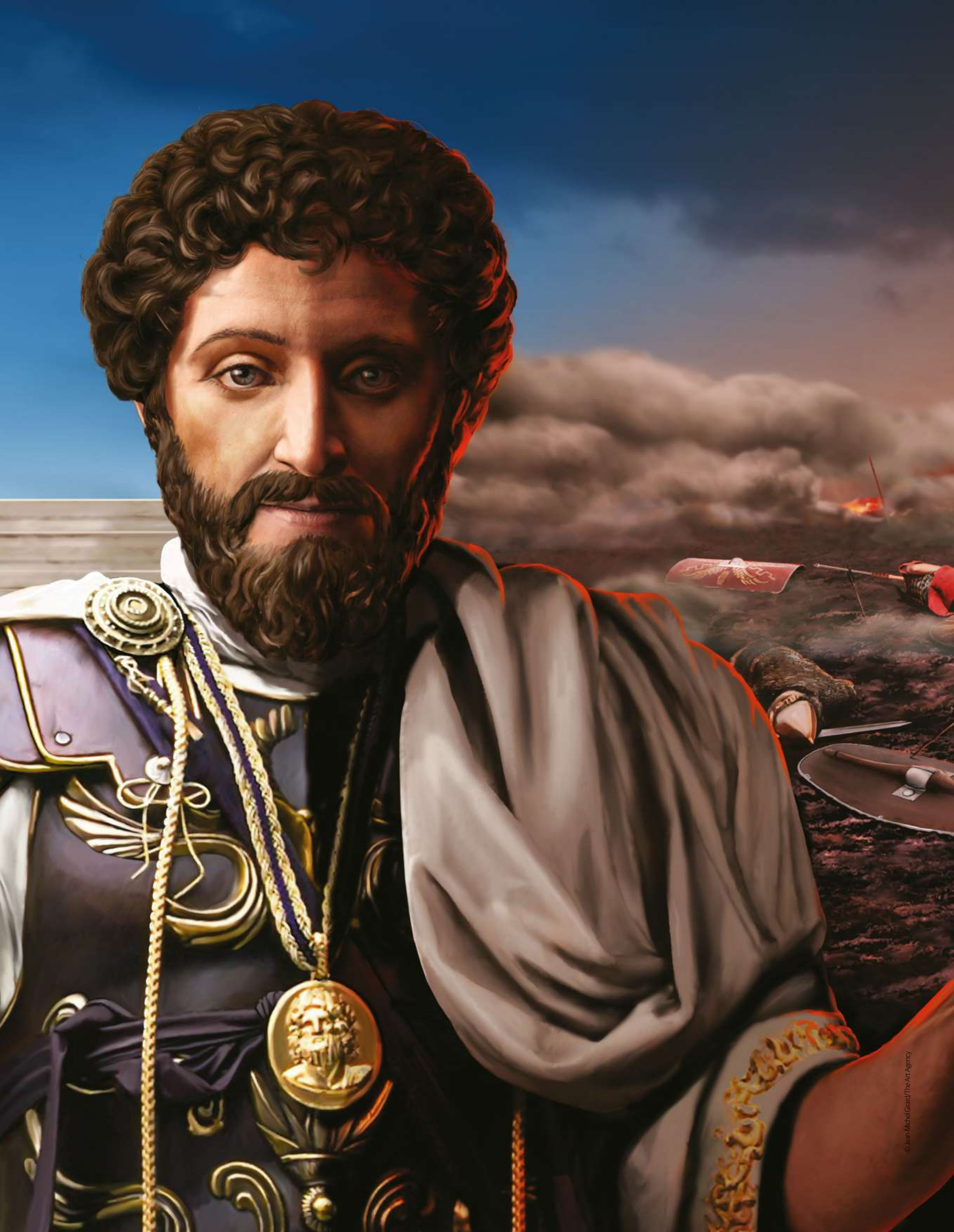
To answer the question, it's important to go back to Marcus' youth. Like many an emperor before him, he wasn't born in the purple - that is, he wasn't born to an emperor. No one knew that one day he would rule one of antiquity's greatest empires. However, having said that, his upbringing was certainly upper class; brought up in a mansion on the upmarket Caelian Hill in Rome, the world was at his feet.

Educating children in Ancient Rome was about giving them the best start in life - especially the boys - and so Domitia Lucilla made sure to provide that for her son. It was usually down to the lady of house to organise her sons' educations, and with Marcus' father dying when he was a young boy, the burden rested on Lucilla's shoulders, although Marcus' grandfather did help. A tutor was found for Greek lessons, and another for elocution. A third would be in charge of his moral welfare and general development as he grew into his teens. It was a classic education, and it was clear that Marcus was being primed for one thing: his rise through Rome's political hierarchy.

In his teens, more teachers came. One taught geometry, another music. But it was the art teacher who found something within the young Marcus; Diognetus introduced him to philosophy, and it was something that Marcus would never forget. "From Diognetus... [I learned] to have an affinity for philosophy," he would write in his *Meditations*. Diognetus would be the sixth mentioned out of 17 people who had an impact on his life - not bad going for a secondary school teacher.

When he was 12, Marcus did what many 12-year-olds do: he declared what he wanted to be when he was older. His dream was to be a philosopher, and he began to dress like one. He slept in a Greek cloak on the ground until his mother begged him not to. His heart was set on this new direction.





© Jean-Michel Girard/The Art Agency

So philosophy would always be Marcus' first love but, as it would transpire, he was going to rule some day. At the age of just 17, his life would change forever when he found out that he would be emperor. It would take 20 years until he finally donned the purple toga, and during that time it was a battle between politics and philosophy. Marcus would become consul three times and he was forced to move to the imperial palace. He wasn't too fond of his new abode, as he makes clear in *Meditations*: "Let nobody any more hear you blaming palace life: don't hear yourself blaming it."

Up, up, up the cursus honorum (course of offices) he'd gone, until the fateful day arrived in 161. Antoninus Pius was dead. He'd gone relatively peacefully, but now the burden of the Roman Empire lay on the shoulders of Marcus and his adoptive brother, Lucius Verus. Hobbies and interests had to be put to one side because they were in for a bumpy ride.

Duty came before anything else. As Marcus was bestowed the standard imperial titles of Augustus and Pontifex Maximus, he accepted them with a heavy heart. Gone was his freedom. Almost immediately, war was afoot. The rivalry between Parthia and Rome had finally reached boiling point, and King Vologases IV decided to invade Syria, managing to overthrow its governor. The time had finally come to sort the Parthians out.

Out of Rome's two co-emperors, Marcus was definitely considered to be the senior of the pair from the start, and it was he who noticed that the presence of an emperor was needed on the eastern border. But it wouldn't be Marcus who would go – he would send Lucius to sort out the problem, while he stayed in Rome to consolidate their rule. But despite the fact that he didn't travel there himself, Marcus knew exactly what needed to be sent, dispatching three of the top legions that were currently on the Rhine and the Danube, as well as part of the Praetorian Guard and thousands of auxiliaries. It was a shrewd move, and it was one that was designed to result in an early victory for the adoptive brothers. Moreover, it was an impressive feat for someone who had had minimal military experience.

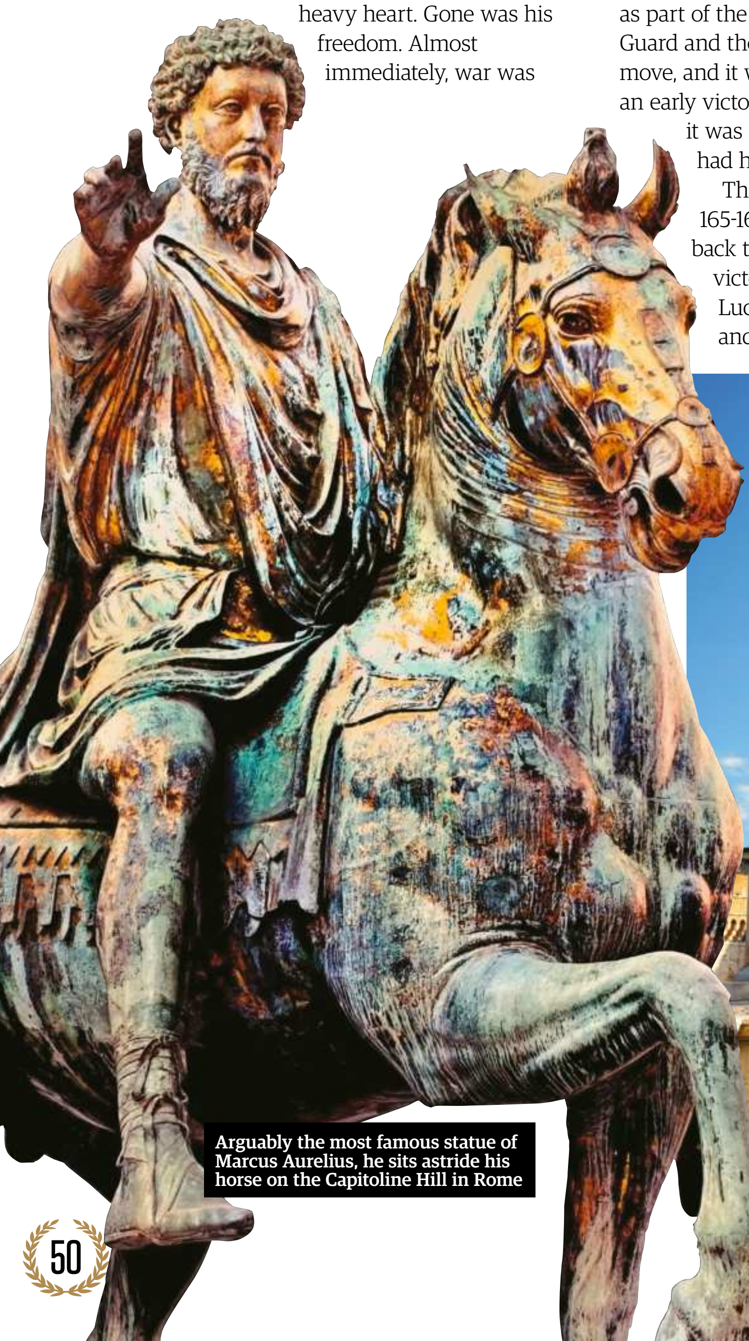
The Romans would be victorious; in 165-166, Roman soldiers began to come back to Rome as the war eased off, the final victory being won in 166. Marcus and Lucius claimed the names Armeniacus and Particus in celebration, and Lucius headed home for his triumph – but he should have stayed away.

> "In a rare occurrence with the Roman rulership, we have a chance to see directly into an emperor's mind"

As the legions spread back through the empire, they brought something with them that was more deadly than their weapons. Seeping into every city and settlement was a vicious plague. The disease swept across the empire and down the Italian peninsula, killing 5 million Romans before it died out itself 15 years later. It was clear to all that the mighty Roman Empire was weakened, and it wouldn't take long before outsiders realised that this was their chance to invade.

To the north were Germanic tribes, but they weren't considered too much of a threat. Having signed a peace treaty with the Romans, they were expected to stay on their side of the Danube, but with unrest and rioting among the tribes, they needed to spread out. The Marcomanni and Quadi tribes headed further and further south, until they found themselves at the Roman border. Luckily for them, it was largely undefended thanks to Marcus having sent most of its soldiers to Parthia and suffering from plague. The Marcomannic Wars had begun. It was to be one of Marcus' greatest tests, but it would also cement his legacy in another field.

In 168, both co-emperors made their way to the border along with a Roman force to dispel the barbarians. Leaving the legions there, they



Arguably the most famous statue of Marcus Aurelius, he sits astride his horse on the Capitoline Hill in Rome

soon made their way back to Rome, but time was running short for one of them. In 169, Lucius died, leaving Marcus, the reluctant ruler, in sole charge of the Roman Empire. Realising he had to step up and take charge, Marcus headed to the warzone once more. He couldn't risk the empire looking weak after the death of another emperor.

Leading the Roman war machine from Carnuntum, 40 kilometres from modern-day Vienna, Austria, this was where Marcus' complex character began to come into play. While directing an army against a foreign invasion, the emperor began to write down some of his thoughts - his meditations, if you will - in a rambling collection that grew over time.

Later dubbed *Meditations*, Marcus' writings are arguably what has brought him the most fame, but the irony is that they were never meant to be seen. Taking the form of a personal notebook, it seems to have been a way for Marcus to engage in philosophical exercises that would change his behaviour and way of thinking, for in the ancient world, that's what philosophy was all about. It wasn't about theoretical arguments, but discovering how to carry out your life. As such, it's possible, to a certain extent, to treat *Meditations* autobiographically. In a rare occurrence with the Roman rulership, we have a chance to see directly into an emperor's mind.

The original name of Marcus' writings was *Ta eis heauton*, or *To Himself*, and the emperor refers to himself in both the first and third person throughout as he pens his thoughts on himself, leadership and life. It's almost become a textbook for Stoics over the preceding centuries, and it's that fame that has increased Marcus' legacy as a philosopher above all else. Having said that, there were things that he did in his lifetime to support this view, such as creating four Chairs of Philosophy in Athens, with one each for the principal philosophical traditions: Platonic, Aristotelian, Stoic and Epicurean. Out of those four, though, it was Stoicism that would define the emperor. He was described as a Stoic by Julius Capitolinus, one of his ancient biographers, and he makes reference to a number of Stoics who had taught him throughout *Meditations*.

Marcus seemed to refer to the version of Stoicism that was put forward by Epictetus, who proposed three areas of study that an apprentice philosopher should be trained in: desires and aversions, the impulse to act and not to act, and freedom from deception. These corresponded to the early Stoic ideas of the physical, the ethical and the logical. Marcus was certainly a follower of this strand of Stoicism, as can be seen in *Meditations* 9.7: "Erase the print of imagination, stop impulse, quench desire: keep your directing mind its own master."

The reflection upon oneself was also a Stoic idea, and the emperor does seem to have been analysing his own thoughts, while rejecting those he thinks detrimental to his person. It was clearly a personal process, as he had no audience to define himself to. And as a seemingly unending war raged on outside his camp, Marcus wrote. But why?

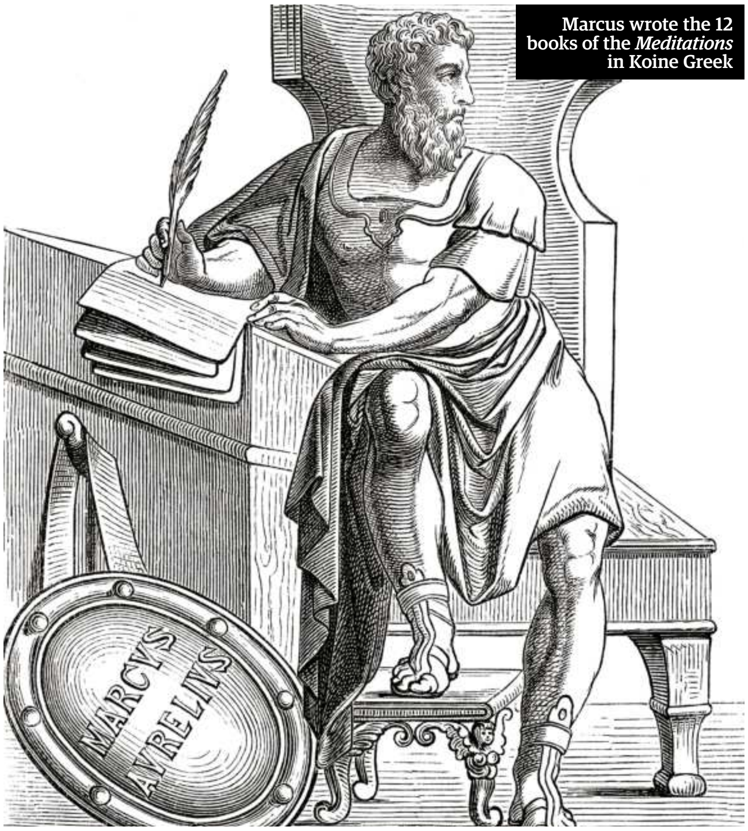
Many have suggested that philosophy was always Marcus' first love, and that's hard to refute when you learn of his upbringing and his love of philosophy as a teenager. Others have put forward the idea that he felt intellectually unstimulated

WEIGHING THE LEGACY

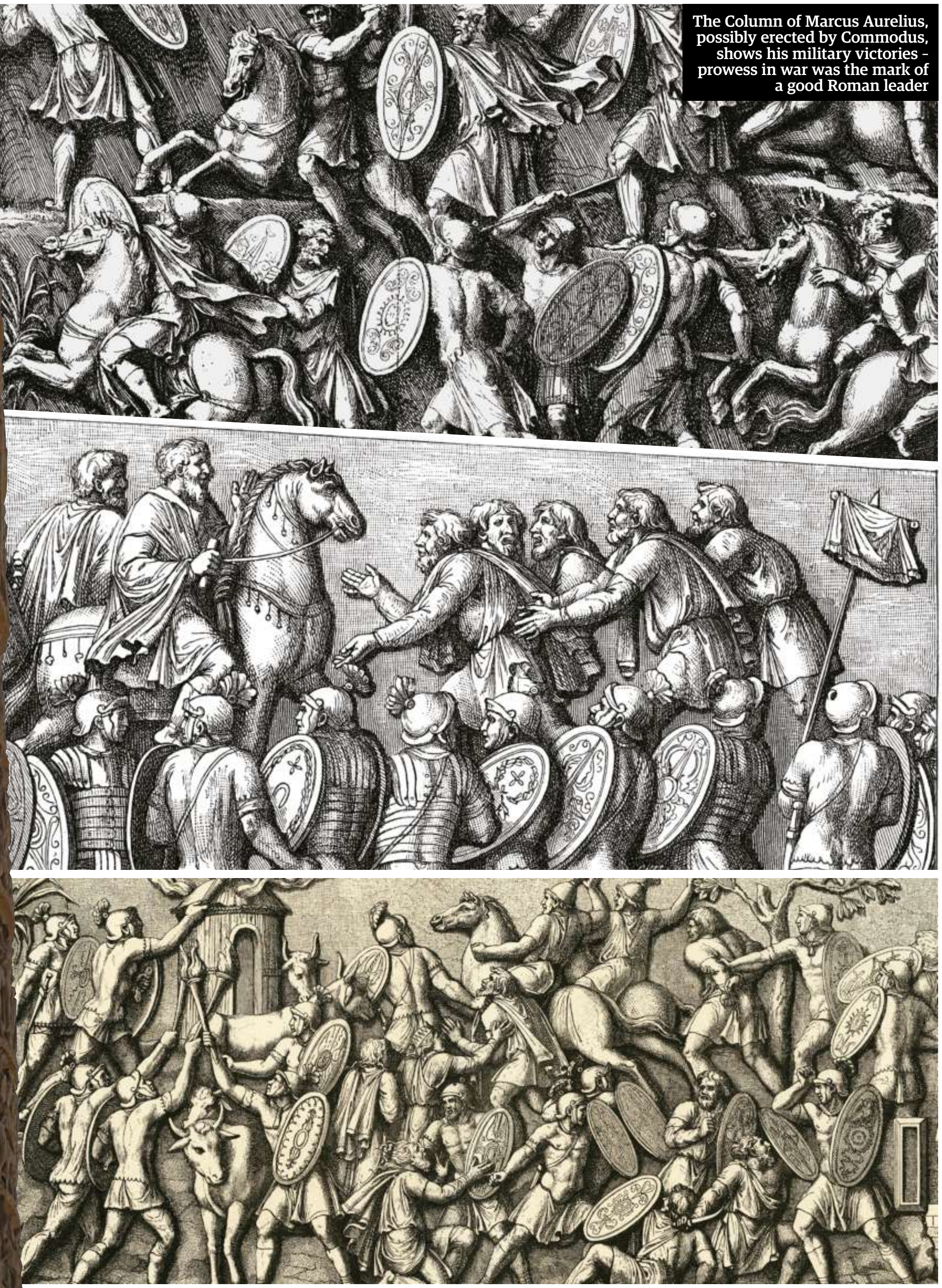
Was Marcus Aurelius more of a philosopher or a despot?

PHILOSOPHER	DESPOT
Writing something like *Meditations* was a very Stoic thing to do	Was able to command incredible respect from his subjects
Set up the four Chairs of Philosophy in Athens	Spent time on the front in the Marcomannic War
Became deeply enamoured with philosophy from a very young age	Was ruler during era of increased persecution of Christians in provinces
Accepted leadership somewhat unwillingly - he had wanted to dedicate his life to philosophy	Flattered the Senate by asking permission for spending despite being supreme leader
Generally tried to live his life by philosophical principles - at least, as far as we can tell	Chose a hereditary heir to succeed him, the first emperor to do so for nearly 100 years

The Mausoleum of Hadrian - also called the Castel Sant'Angelo - in Rome, where Marcus and many other emperors were interred



Marcus wrote the 12 books of the *Meditations* in Koine Greek



The Column of Marcus Aurelius, possibly erected by Commodus, shows his military victories – prowess in war was the mark of a good Roman leader

RISE TO POWER

There were 20 years between being named an heir and becoming emperor

Birth
Born to Marcus Annius Verus III and Domitia Lucilla, Marcus enjoys a wealthy upbringing on the Caelian Hill.
121 CE

A young priest
Aged just eight, Marcus is made a priest of Mars in the college of the Salii. He would become a leader of the dance, seer and master.
128 CE

LIKE FATHER, LIKE SON?

Sometimes it just doesn't run in the family

If there's one thing that the 2000 epic *Gladiator* got right, it's that Marcus and his son Commodus were entirely different characters. Where Marcus was revered by his people, Commodus was hated at an almost Nero-like level, with ancient historians later calling him "accursed and foul".

Of around 13 children, only five of Marcus and Faustina's offspring lived to adulthood, the only boy being Commodus – in fact, he'd had a twin brother who had died. But many had wished Commodus had perished with him; Julius Capitolinus went so far as to write: "Had [Marcus] been truly fortunate, he would not have left a son." Of course, he was writing with hindsight, but the point still stands: why were father and son so different?

Marcus tried to give his son the best start in life, with an unrivalled education that Commodus seemed to enjoy. But the drive just wasn't there, and he couldn't have been less interested in politics. While he served in the Roman army by his father's side in the Marcomannic Wars, he was keen to seek peace after Marcus' death, with many questioning if his mother had had an affair. Surely this man who began a 12-year reign of terror couldn't be the son of the great Marcus Aurelius?

being away from his court for so long, so he set himself the exercise of writing down his thoughts.

From the evidence we've seen so far, there seems to have been almost a 50-50 split between Marcus' acts as a Roman leader and a philosopher – but there is another piece of evidence to support the former. In 175, rumours were circulating. There were whispers that the emperor was dead, and so in Antioch, one of his former generals, Avidius Cassius, proclaimed himself leader of the empire. But Marcus wasn't dead, and he made the trek east to prove it. The speed with which the insurrection was put down, and with such little bloodshed, proved Marcus' power, and that wasn't something that came from philosophy. This was a man who commanded respect, who had seen the city of Rome through flood and famine, who had subdued the Parthians.

Those familiar with the 2000 film *Gladiator* may remember Marcus' last words as his son (historically inaccurately) strangles him. "Will I be known as the philosopher, the warrior, the tyrant?" he chokes out. It has been impossible to go through every piece of evidence that points to the legacy Marcus has left behind – entire books have been written on the subjects, after all – but we've gained a solid understanding of who the emperor was and where he came from.

There are strong arguments for Marcus the philosopher, but to what extent can he actually be classed as one? The largest surviving relic we have is *Meditations*, but does that make him a philosopher, or just a follower of philosophy? He came up with no original treatises, instead choosing to study and follow the greats like Epictetus and Epicurus, and it's hard to know how much he actually wrote. It could also be argued that he's only remembered as a philosopher because he was the only emperor of that ilk – the others are remembered for being tyrannical, unmatched in war or for their reforms.

> "This was a man who commanded respect, who had seen Rome through flood and famine"

Leadership and military command seemed to suit Marcus well. Cassius Dio wrote that "he ruled better than any others who had ever been in any position of power", and while he suffered losses, he ultimately kept the empire together when it was at risk of being torn asunder by invaders. He led his people through famine, plague and war, keeping peace internally while showing little mercy to his enemies. He was also actively involved in internal state affairs, and evidence can be found of this on his triumphal column in Rome. One panel shows a relief of the emperor reading a petition, and it's well known that he read and replied to similar items that came from all over the empire. On top of this, he acted as a judge and attended Senate meetings, showing that his role was something that he took incredibly seriously.

But then perhaps this was Marcus reaching for a philosophical ideal, as he wrote: "Wrestle to be the man philosophy wished to make you."

So why do we remember Marcus more for his philosophy than his leadership? Is it because he left something tangible behind with his *Meditations*? Or is it because his rule was overshadowed by his son Commodus, who has come to be considered one of Rome's most depraved rulers? Does he even deserve the reputation he's been left with?

However you see Marcus Aurelius – whether it's as a philosopher, a leader, or anything else – his words echo down the centuries. It's perhaps a little ironic that the man whose legacy has lasted for almost 2,000 years once wrote: "You do not have thousands of years to live. Urgency is on you. While you live, while you can, become good."

Marcus is one of the most fascinating, layered figures in all Roman history

The first engagement
Marcus is engaged to Ceionia Fabia, the daughter of Lucius Aelius and sister of later emperor Lucius Verus, who was next in line to rule until he died two years later. He also takes the toga virilis.
136 CE

Adopted by Antoninus Pius
Shortly before Hadrian's death, he announces two generations of heirs: first Antoninus Pius, then Marcus and Lucius Verus.
138 CE

Consul
Marcus serves as consul alongside his father-in-law Emperor Antoninus Pius. This would be the first time of three that he would be consul.
140 CE

Consul again; marriage to Faustina
Marcus' engagement to Ceionia Fabia is broken off, and he instead marries Faustina the Younger, daughter of Antoninus Pius.
145 CE

Vivat Caesar
In his dying days, Antoninus Pius formally declares Marcus his successor. Finally, in 161, the day arrives, and Marcus takes the purple.
161 CE

© Getty Images, Jean-Michel Girard/The Art Agency

177-192 CE

COMMODUS

Though he was groomed from birth to become emperor, he proved one of the most notoriously inept of all time

Written by Hareth Al Bustani

After the murder of the tyrant Domitian, Rome's imperial succession had become determined through merit-based adoption rather than birth. It had proved a fantastic system, producing five successive brilliant rulers. However, Marcus Aurelius, the last of the Five Good Emperors, found himself with an empire at its peak - far too large for one man to rule. He shared responsibility with Lucius Verus, who, like Marcus, had been adopted by the emperor Hadrian. In securing the future, he turned to his sons Commodus and Annius - bequeathing them the titles of Caesar, or junior emperor.

M COMMODVS ANTONINVS AVG

Commodus built a cult of personality around himself, rewarding his friends and murdering any he considered a threat

Having secured peace with the Parthians, Lucius died of the plague while fighting off the tribes north of the Danube, and Annius perished soon after. When Commodus came of age, desperate to secure a smooth succession, his father nominated him a fellow Augustus and the two campaigned against the northern tribes. Even as Marcus breathed his last in 180 CE, he said, "Go to the rising sun; I am already setting," paving the path for Commodus, who ascended as sole emperor with no doubt of his credentials.

On one hand the young prince held great promise - his father, the great philosopher, soldier and statesman, had prepared him his whole life for this moment. However, while he had spent his entire youth beneath the burden of empire, Commodus had never experienced the pleasures of power. In a seemingly auspicious ceremony, as his father was laid to rest Commodus delivered a speech to the troops, expressing solidarity and kinship, afterwards handing out money for good measure. Later, he met with Marcus' trusted advisors, who beseeched he continue his father's attempts to subjugate the northern tribes and expand Rome's realm.

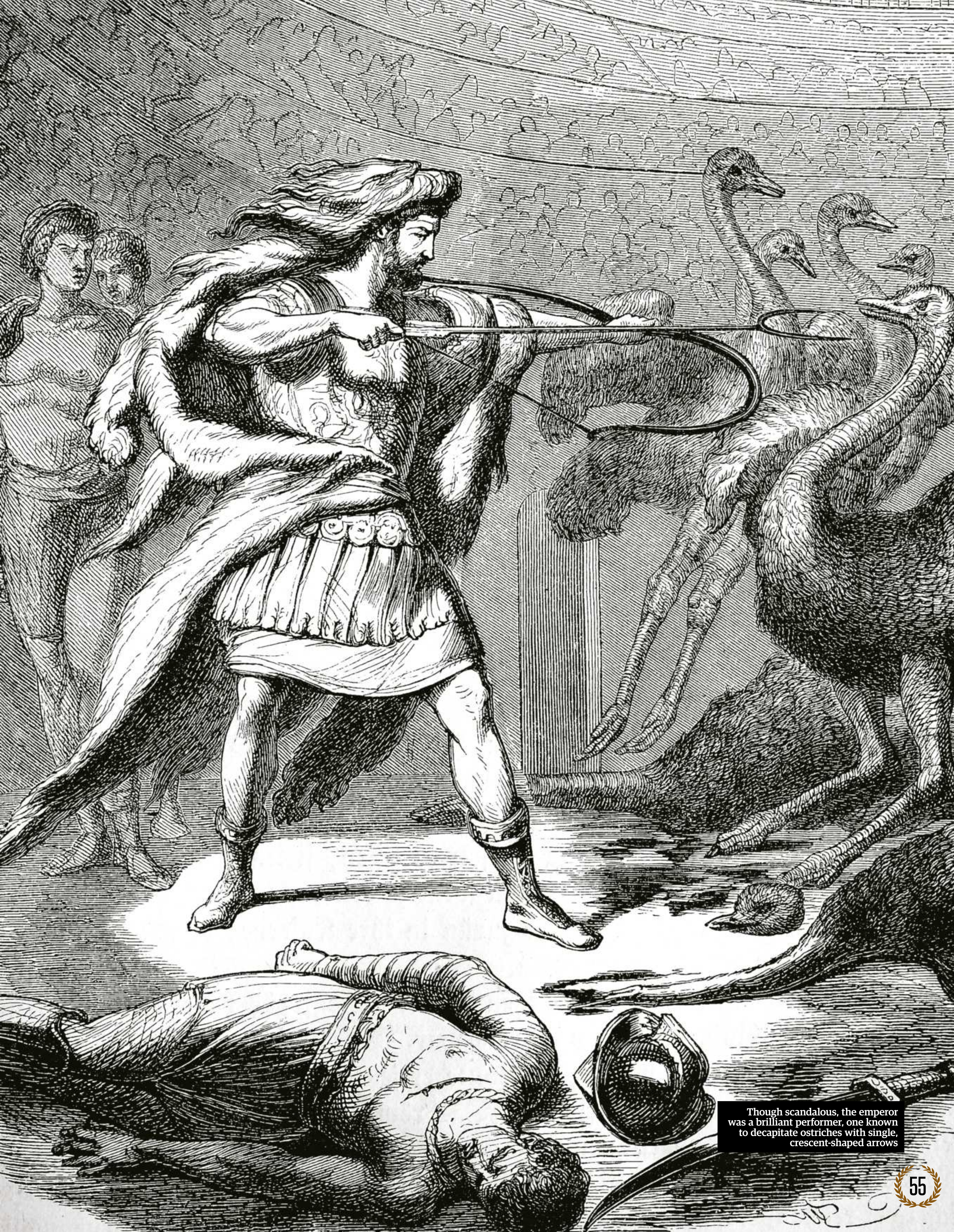
Though he heeded them at first, as the campaign dragged on others reminded him incessantly of the temptations that lay back in Rome. Eventually, Commodus chose to ignore his father's advisors, negotiating a peace treaty with the Marcomanni and Quadi, supposedly to better secure his position back home.

He arrived in Rome to a fanfare of flowers and laurel branches - a welcome befitting an emperor of his stock. Those who had not seen him before were struck by his strong eyes, which "flashed like lightning" and curly blond locks, glistening like gold dust. Some even reported a divine light around his head. Having visited the Temple of Jupiter, according to Cassius Dio, who lived through the events, he allegedly made a trivial speech to the Senate, recounting his great exploits.

After surviving an early assassination attempt, the emperor grew increasingly paranoid, purging suspected enemies, senators and generals alike - regardless of their innocence. According to Dio, anyone too powerful, noble, well-educated or remarkable in any other way was quickly killed - from the ex-consuls Paternus and Salvius to the wealthy Quintilius brothers. One of the Quintilius' sons was said to have escaped by faking his own death, and when rumour of this broke out, scores of lookalikes were put to the sword.

However, just as he spread fear through the upper ranks, Commodus handed out money to the masses - 140 denarii a piece, with senators, their wives and children donating two denarii each. He also rewarded his friends, appointing them into positions of power. The most successful was Cleander, a former slave who rose through the ranks to become Commodus' chamberlain. Cleander deeply resented the renowned Praetorian prefect, Perennis, for undermining his power and schemes. After amassing enough clout, he turned both the Praetorians and Commodus against Perennis and had him executed for treason, thereby paving the way for his own usurpation of the fallen prefect's power.

By 190 CE, Cleander had made himself the second most powerful man in Rome. In recognition



Though scandalous, the emperor was a brilliant performer, one known to decapitate ostriches with single, crescent-shaped arrows

While Marcus Aurelius was a visionary emperor, he failed to foresee his son's descent into megalomania

of his newfound influence, Commodus named him 'The Dagger'. With his rival out of the way, Cleander revelled in his newfound authority – making careers, ending lives and allegedly selling consulships for profit, appointing 25 in just one year, including one Septimius Severus.

However, Cleander's reputation would soon begin to prove a curse. In 189 CE, with Rome already decimated by a plague, a famine broke out, and the grain commissioner deliberately exacerbated the food shortage. Apparently, in anticipation of such an event, Cleander had previously placed most of the grain supply in storage so he could come to the rescue, handing out food to the grateful masses.

However, things did not turn out quite as planned. When a riot broke out calling for Cleander's head, Commodus panicked and simply had his friend killed, along with his son and friends – an act that wiped out his greatest threat and ally.

As his friends grew powerful, Commodus withdrew from matters of the state and hurled himself into delusions of grandeur. He ordered Rome be renamed Commodiana and the legions called Commodian. He not only styled himself after but claimed to be Hercules, erecting statues of himself across Rome dressed as the Greek hero. He even went so far as to cut the head off the Colossus of Nero, replacing it with his own – perfected with a Herculean club and a lion at its feet, alongside an inscription celebrating his left-handed martial prowess. In 192 CE he made the Senate recognise him as a god: Hercules Romanus.

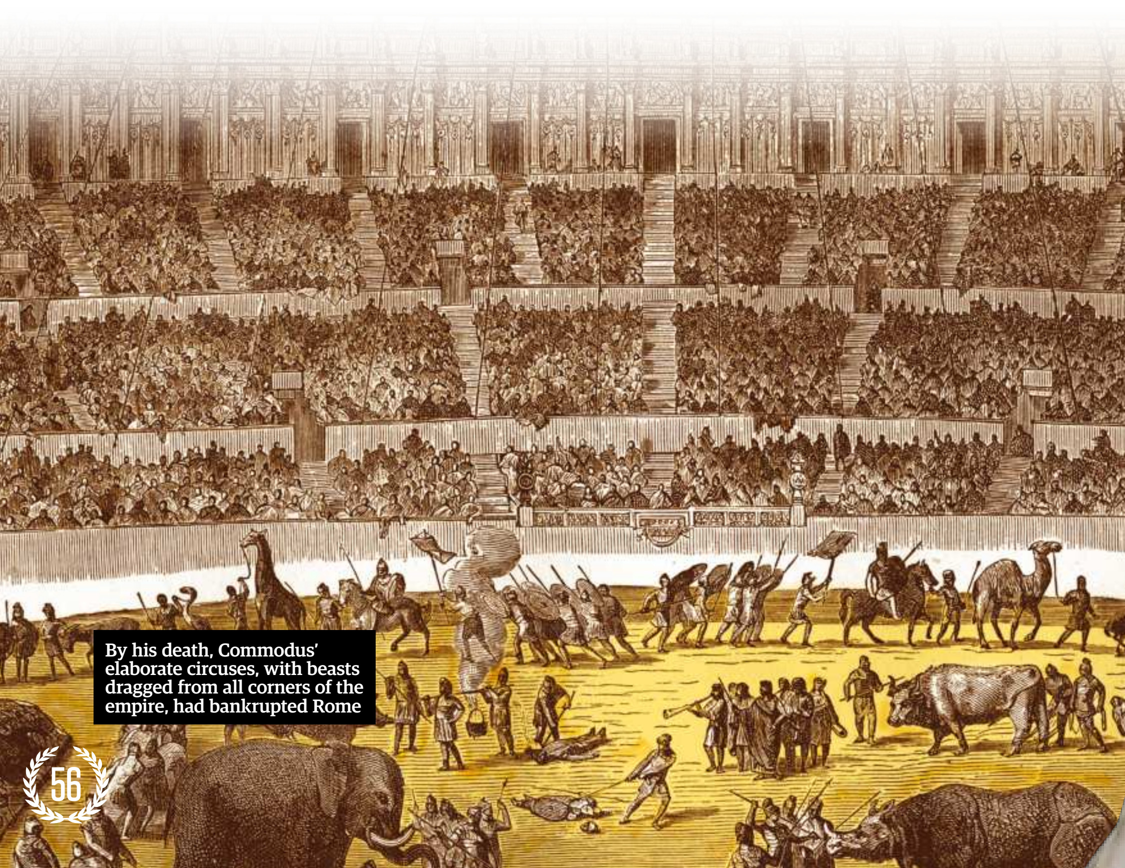
> "Commodus' history has been written by his detractors, and he probably was much beloved by the masses"

With Cleander gone, senators and generals alike grew terrified of the increasingly unpredictable emperor. While he had once called the prefect Julianus 'father', publicly kissing and embracing him, now he had him killed, along with countless others senators and civilians. Dio says it was not unusual for 2,000 people to be killed in the capital in a single day, with criminals paid to inject poison into people.

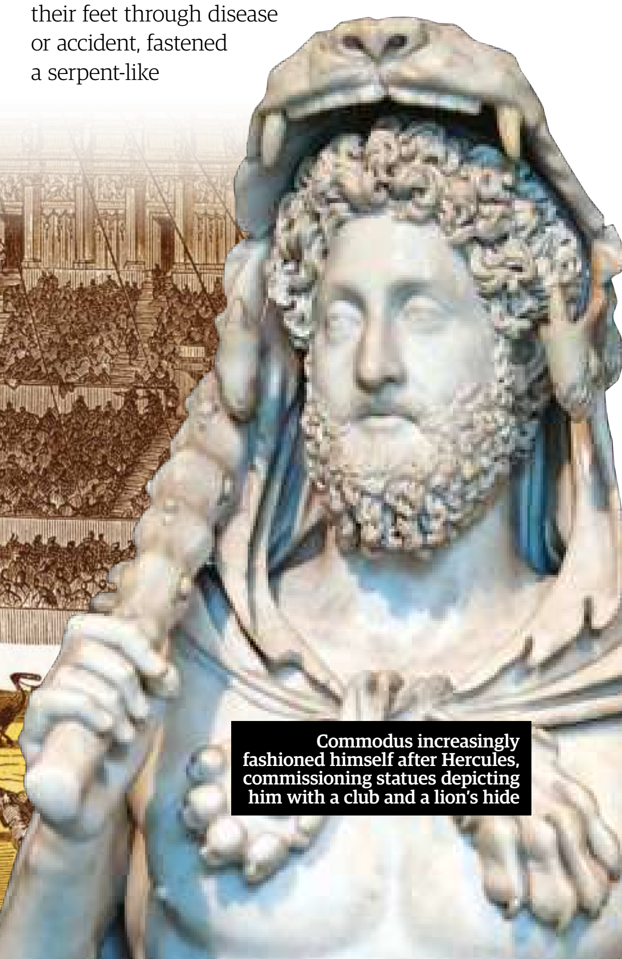
At first Commodus entertained his athletic aspirations in private, with gladiatorial bouts that often ended in him 'accidentally' cutting off people's noses and ears. However, before long he began reinforcing his own myth-making by taking to the Colosseum. Nothing was more grotesque to the patricians, nor more endearing to the plebeians. Skipping his public performances was not an option, as he entered the arena in a purple robe with gold spangles, a Greek cloak and a crown filled with Indian gems, holding a staff like that of Mercury. Then, like a true showman, he would cast aside his entrance attire and battle against man and beast alike dressed in just a tunic. To his credit he was quite the performer. One on occasion he killed 100 bears with arrows – taking a break to gulp down a spectator's wine as the crowd roared, "Long life to you!".

On another occasion, having been trained by expert Persian bowmen and Moroccan javelinmen, he slayed a tiger, hippopotamus and elephant – from an upper terrace he had built to keep him safe. Plebeians had never seen such creatures before, and watching their emperor slay them with single arrows or javelins was quite the spectacle.

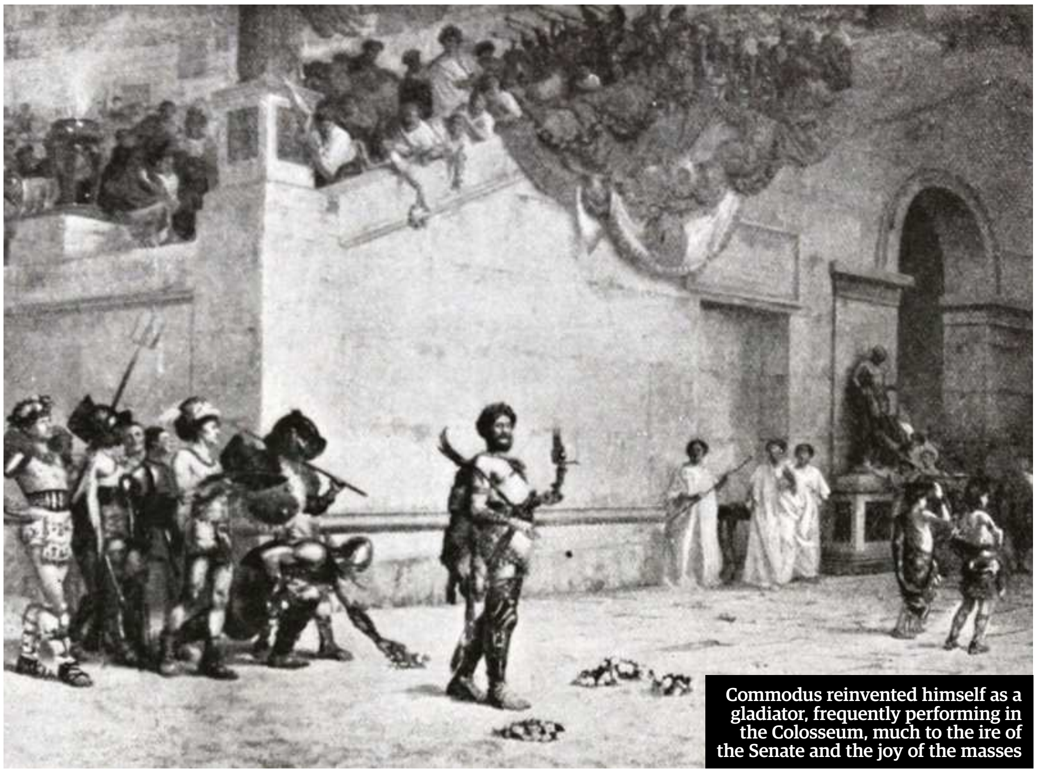
Holding a shield in his right hand and a wooden sword in his left, he battled warriors, taking 1 million sesterces for each victory. Soon he began introducing real weapons and pulling stunts such as fastening men together and commanding them to kill each other. For 14 days Commodus staged such spectacles, growing increasingly violent and absurd. Eager to act out his Herculean adventures, he gathered all the men from Rome who had lost their feet through disease or accident, fastened a serpent-like



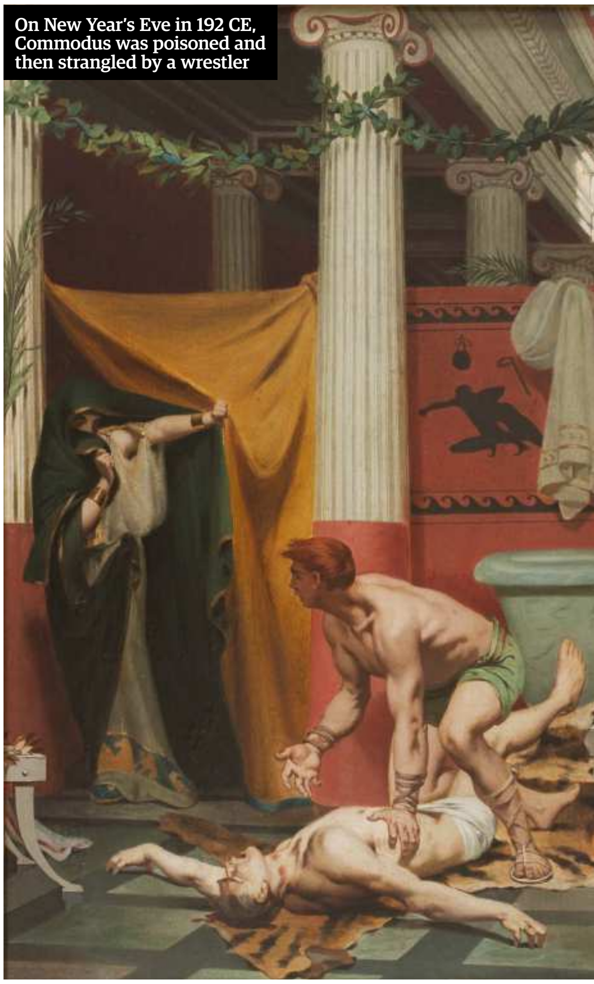
By his death, Commodus' elaborate circuses, with beasts dragged from all corners of the empire, had bankrupted Rome



Commodus increasingly fashioned himself after Hercules, commissioning statues depicting him with a club and a lion's hide



Commodus reinvented himself as a gladiator, frequently performing in the Colosseum, much to the ire of the Senate and the joy of the masses



On New Year's Eve in 192 CE, Commodus was poisoned and then strangled by a wrestler

appendage to their bodies and dragged them into the Colosseum. There they were given sponges to throw while Commodus clubbed them to death, all the while pretending they were giants.

The emperor even had the nerve to behead an ostrich and approach the Senate grinning with his sword raised - a move they all perceived as a clear threat. Dio says that their greatest fear was erupting in laughter, for that would be an immediate death sentence. However, the immense sums of money spent gathering beasts from around the world was no laughing matter.

With Commodus withdrawn from matters of state, his new Praetorian prefect, Quintus Aemilius Laetus, began filling posts with fellow North Africans. On New Year's Eve in 192 CE, Laetus and the palace chamberlain decided enough was enough and poisoned Commodus. However, the binge-drinking emperor simply vomited it back up. When he retired to his bath the plotters instead sent a wrestler called Narcissus to strangle him. Commodus was just 31 years old.

Though Rome had managed to rid itself of a tyrant, one who had rarely ventured outside the capital and left the treasury bare, Commodus' murder triggered an earthquake of chaos that would soon set off an avalanche as the emperorship descended into anarchy and Rome's golden age came to a jarring end.

Of course, Commodus' history has been written by his detractors, and he probably was much beloved by the masses. Dio's account is aided as much by his role as a witness to proceedings as it is encumbered by his personal bias against the emperor. He said the ascension of Commodus was the moment the empire turned from one "of gold to one of iron and rust". Perhaps the greatest tragedy was the wasted potential of an emperor who inherited an empire at its peak, whose perfectly planned succession instead sowed the seeds of civil war for the century to come.

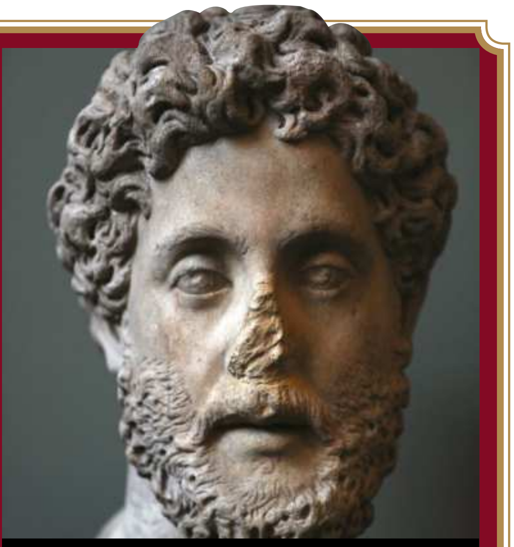
DAMNATIO MEMORIAE

After his death Commodus enjoyed an awkward legacy, first being wiped from public memory before then being reinstated and even deified

Following his death, Commodus was succeeded by the reluctant senator Pertinax, who sought to return the empire to its virtuous past. The soldiers referred to Commodus not as the former emperor but disparagingly as 'the gladiator', 'the charioteer', 'the left-handed' and 'the ruptured'. Though they were furious about losing the privileges their fallen emperor had bestowed upon them, Commodus was declared a public enemy, and in an act of damnatio memoriae – damnation of memory – Rome was rid of any trace of his existence. His statues were removed from public view, his likeness chiselled off columns and the Colossus of Nero restored to its original form.

After Pertinax's murder, however, Didius Julianus began restoring the images of Commodus and even added the name to his own. His successor, Septimius Severus, secured legitimacy by having himself adopted as the grandson of Marcus Aurelius posthumously. He had no choice but to restore Commodus' legacy and forced the Senate to deify the fallen emperor in 197 CE, just four years after his condemnation.

As Roman history was written by the patricians, who loathed Commodus' athletic antics, he has been immortalised as a murderous buffoon. While it is likely that he was beloved by the masses, this, and any of his most remarkable accomplishments, have been wiped out by the caricature of the gladiator-emperor.



After his death, images of Commodus, ranging from statues to inscriptions, were defaced and removed

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YEAR OF THE FIVE EMPERORS

After the death of Commodus the empire was thrown into chaos, with the military-minded Septimius Severus emerging supreme

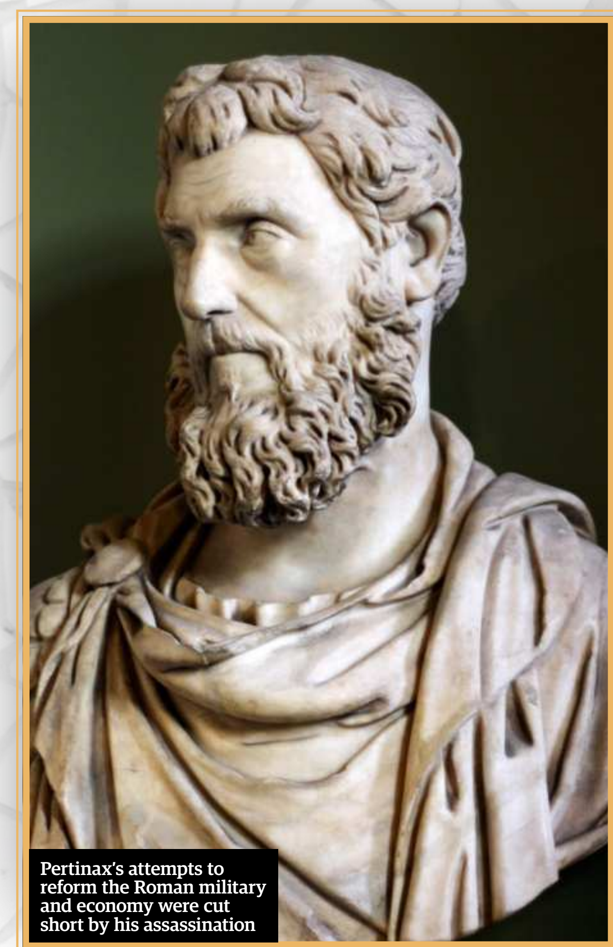
Written by **Hareth Al Bustani**

On New Year's Eve in 192 CE, the emperor Commodus, son of Marcus Aurelius, was strangled to death on the orders of his Praetorian prefect, Aemilius Laetus. Having endured a 12-year descent into tyranny and corruption, the empire longed for a return to the Five Good Emperors who had ruled just prior.

Commodus was replaced by Pertinax, a virtuous senator who accepted the post with great reluctance. A disciplinarian, he instated reforms clearly geared at instilling honesty and duty back into the ranks and attempting to reverse the damage caused by his predecessor. However, the Praetorian Guard, who had prospered under the chaos of Commodus, had other ideas.

They murdered Pertinax just months into his reign. The Praetorians then proceeded to auction off his imperial position to Didius Julianus, a wealthy businessman living in exile. When word of this scandal broke out, three outraged generals began making plans of their own. Chief among them was Septimius Severus, who had the shortest path to Rome.

Allying with the governor of Britain, Clodius Albinus, he marched on the capital, dissolving the Praetorian Guard while the Senate had Julianus executed. After dealing with his strongest rival, Pescennius Niger, to the east, he later came head to head with Albinus – emerging supreme and establishing a dynasty of his own.



Pertinax's attempts to reform the Roman military and economy were cut short by his assassination

PERTINAX

JANUARY – MARCH 193 CE

Perhaps the most deserving of the imperial purple, Pertinax fell prey to the Praetorian Guard's vulgar vices

Born the son of a slave, Pertinax rose through the military ranks, becoming an equestrian before ascending to the senate. His brilliance saw him appointed various governorships, before he was reluctantly declared emperor at 67 years old. Though Pertinax was awarded all the standard imperial honours, he denied the titles of Augusta and Caesar on behalf of his wife and son. His disciplinarian desire to restore virtue to the empire was well received by the Senate, but did little to endear him to the Praetorian Guard, accustomed to the liberality of Commodus' reign.

When summoned in order to pledge their loyalty to the new emperor, a group dragged in the senator Triarius Maternus and declared him emperor instead - but he fled, tearing the clothes off his body and ran to the palace naked. Rather than pursue a path of revenge, Pertinax set about reversing the damage done by Commodus. He recalled exiles, supported the families of executed men, sold off excess slaves and set about ridding his court of dead weight.

Though he inherited an empty treasury, he had wisely paid the Praetorians and masses their customary donatives, albeit less than usual, before restoring the silver denarius, which had been severely debased. Eager to stimulate the economy, he lowered customs and granted waste lands, with a decade of tax exemptions.

However, just 87 days into his rule, he was murdered on the orders of Laetus, the kingslayer, who had now murdered both the most foul and the most virtuous of men.

DIDIUS JULIANUS

MARCH – JUNE 193 CE

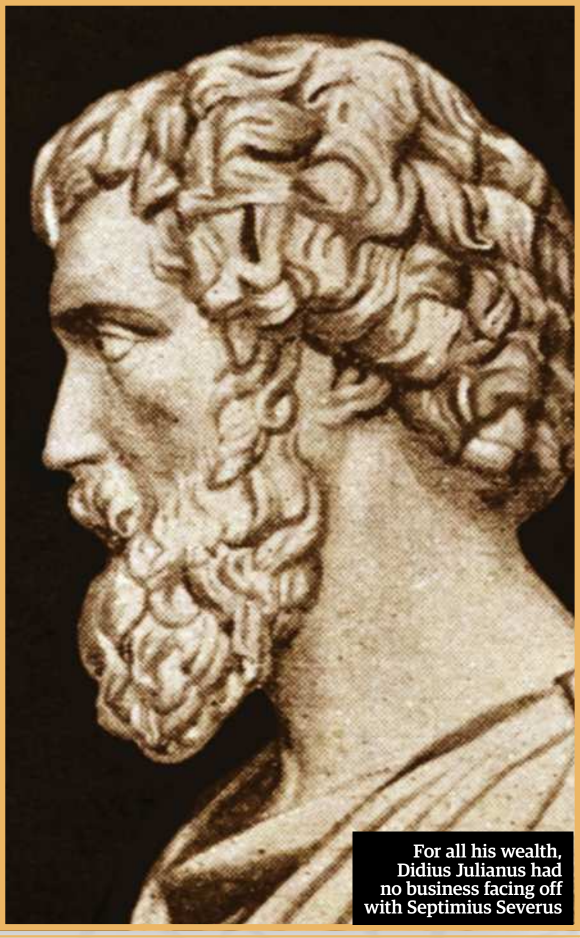
With Rome in chaos, one wealthy businessman made the riskiest investment of them all, and came up short

In one of the most grotesque and shameful moments in the history of the Roman Empire, after murdering Pertinax, the Praetorian Guard decided there was no need to bother with the delicate art of appointing a successor, and they simply auctioned the title off.

Among the various bidders for the 'honour' was Didius Julianus, a wealthy businessman with a loose purse, whose ambition had led Commodus to exile him to Milan. Having travelled to Rome, he entered into a bidding war with Pertinax's father-in-law and prefect of the city, Flavius Sulpicianus. Finally, at 25,000 sesterces, Julianus, who reminded the Praetorians that Sulpicianus might very well seek revenge, had his way - a small sum for an empire.

As he was carried to the Senate, his enemies, and friends of Pertinax, feared his wrath. To cap off the chaotic day, Julianus delivered a speech to the senate house, declaring "I am here alone", while surrounded by Praetorian soldiers. When the masses later protested his usurpation, Julianus ordered them killed, but this only further enflamed their rage.

Though he feigned humility and flattery, when he heard that the general Septimius Severus was marching against him, Julianus executed Laetus, the Praetorian prefect, and promptly had the Senate declare Severus a public enemy. However, when the Praetorians began negotiating with Severus, the Senate instead condemned Julianus to death and proclaimed his rival as the new emperor.



For all his wealth, Didius Julianus had no business facing off with Septimius Severus

PESCENNIUS NIGER

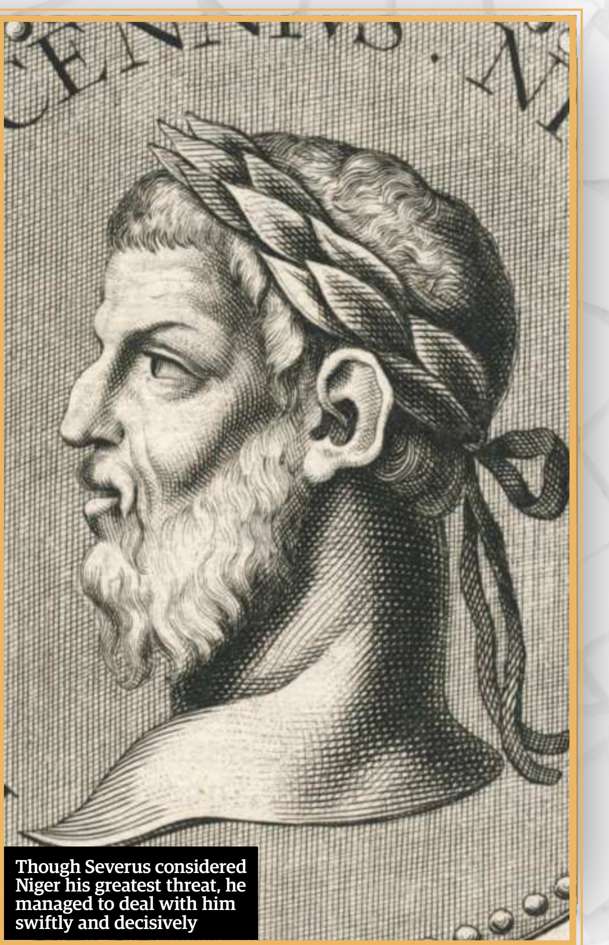
APRIL 193 – MAY 194 CE

Though he commanded great resources, the dangerous governor lacked the ability to succeed

An Italian equestrian, the general Pescennius Niger was made governor of Syria by Commodus. Though not especially gifted, he still managed to lead an enormous army with vast resources at his disposal. When his men heard about the capital's discontent at the rule of Julianus, they proclaimed him emperor instead. Niger's powerful position, especially after he had secured the empire's breadbasket of Egypt, forced Severus into setting up an alliance with Clodius Albinus.

Although Severus reached the capital first, Niger enjoyed the support of Asellius Aemilianus, the proconsul of Asia, and a brilliant diplomat and strategist. However, when Aemilianus was defeated at Byzantium, Niger found himself pushed back into Syria. This loss was significant enough to send several of the cities previously loyal to Niger over to Severus' cause, fearful that they had picked the losing side.

By spring 194 CE, Niger suffered a decisive defeat on the plain of Issus, where Alexander the Great had fought Darius centuries earlier. His army was no match for Severus' Illyrian troops and shock cavalry, and Niger ended up fleeing the field in shame - supposedly seeking refuge among the Persians. However, his rout was cut short when he was captured and subsequently killed - with his head sent to Byzantium, now a rebellious city without a leader. At the end of 195 CE, when Byzantium finally fell to Severus, it was razed to the ground.



Though Severus considered Niger his greatest threat, he managed to deal with him swiftly and decisively

While his army rivalled Severus' in size, Albinus fell short at the Battle of Lyon, meeting his death there

CLODIUS ALBINUS

193 – FEBRUARY 197 CE

The governor of Britain tried to play the long game but failed to secure enough allegiances to defeat Severus

As Severus began his march on Rome, he offered the governor of Britain, Clodius Albinus, an olive branch - he would name him his junior emperor and successor, or Caesar, should he support his claim. This would allow him to march east against Niger without having to worry about defending Rome itself.

With no hope of beating Severus to the capital, this arrangement suited Albinus, who needed time to shore up his base of Britain. Though the two were allies of convenience, neither doubted they would one day have to fight for supremacy. But for now, Albinus claimed his place in the Year of the Five Emperors.

Before long, arrangements started to crumble. In 195 CE, having defeated Niger, Severus handed Albinus a serious snub by naming his own son, Septimius Bassianus, as Caesar - flying in the face of their previous agreement. At the end of 195 CE or the start of 196, Albinus rose to the challenge, declaring himself Augustus, backed by several key senators. He quickly advanced into Gaul and began minting his own currency at Lugdunum, in modern Lyon, France.

However, even while he was in Gaul, Albinus failed to amass universal support. Severus had declared him an enemy of the people and succeeded in securing the Spanish legion's loyalty. When the two inevitably clashed at the epic Battle of Lyon in February 197 CE, Albinus was totally crushed - either committing suicide or executed - before Severus lay waste to the city.

SEPTIMIUS SEVERUS

APRIL 193 – FEBRUARY 211 CE

Through a combination of fortune, wit and military might, Septimius Severus emerged from the chaos with a dynasty of his own

Born in Libya, the general Severus began planning his rise to power long before he was proclaimed emperor

Not only was Septimius Severus in charge of three legions, but he also had a short path to Rome, a decisive advantage in the wars to come. He had also married Julia Domna, who was prophesied to be an emperor's wife, and who gave him access to a wide network of powerful contacts in the east. Sensing the changing of the guard, he began writing to his fellow governors, securing allegiances and shoring up support, just in case.

When news of Pertinax's shameful death and Julianus' disgraceful purchase of the purple reached Severus, he headed straight for Rome. He was welcomed as a liberator, saviour and the hand of justice, coming down to bear on the forces of corruption. He even incorporated Pertinax's name into his own for dramatic effect. Fearing the worst, the Praetorian Guard immediately left the city to negotiate with him, only to be captured and dismissed - uprooting the rotten core from the imperial court and later replacing them with a larger Guard.

Though he brought his army to Rome, he entered in civilian garb, pledging to never execute a senator without trial, and handing out money to the public. After defeating Niger and Albinus, he rolled out proscriptions, executing scores of senators who were loyal to his former rivals. He had named his son Caracalla his heir before adopting himself into Marcus Aurelius' family in order to provide legitimacy, deifying the damned Commodus in the process.

Having secured a dynasty of his own, Severus began reforming the Roman state, which, many argue, set in motion a lot of the reforms that would later drag the empire to its knees. A military man, he gave the soldiers a pay rise, along with the right to marry, while simultaneously increasing fluidity in the ranks. His new legions were led by equestrians, rather than senators, as were many of his eastern provinces.

Creating a new legion at Alba, near Rome, he led an army of 30,000, with loyalists occupying positions of leadership. Among those to benefit was his friend Plautianus, who was appointed prefect of the newly expanded Praetorian Guard.

In 197 CE, with the Parthians fighting amongst themselves, Severus campaigned against them for a second time, crossing over the Euphrates, annexing Mesopotamia and plundering the Persian capital of Ctesiphon. On the way back, Severus visited and reformed the eastern provinces, as well as Egypt, returning to Rome a hero.

In the ensuing decade and a half, Severus would continue to reform the empire, fortifying and extending control in North Africa and reforming Roman law, before travelling to Britain with his sons Caracalla and Geta. There, he repaired Hadrian's Wall, before invading the Caledonians further north. In 211 CE, while preparing for a third invasion, he succumbed to disease in York, leaving the empire to his sons.

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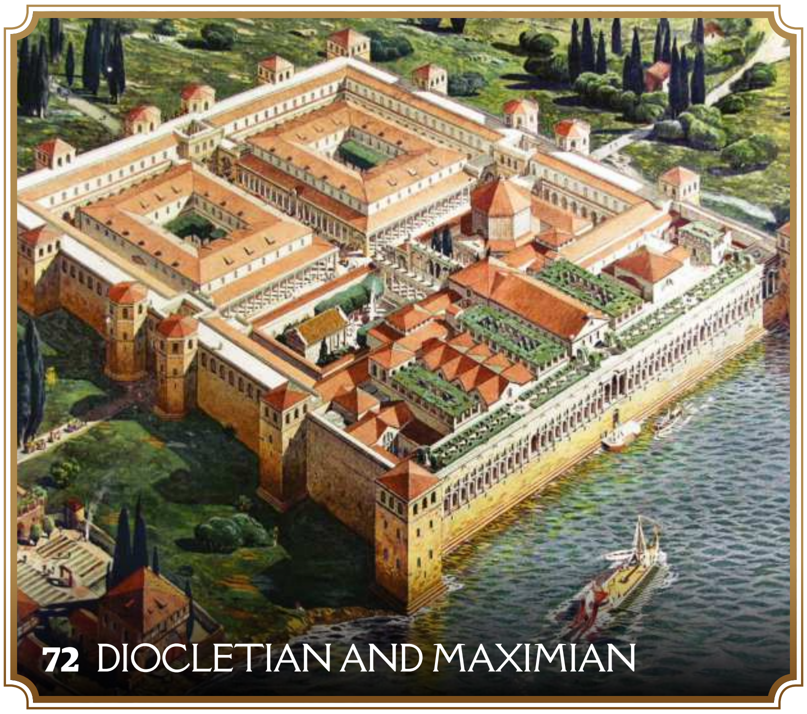
3RD CENTURY

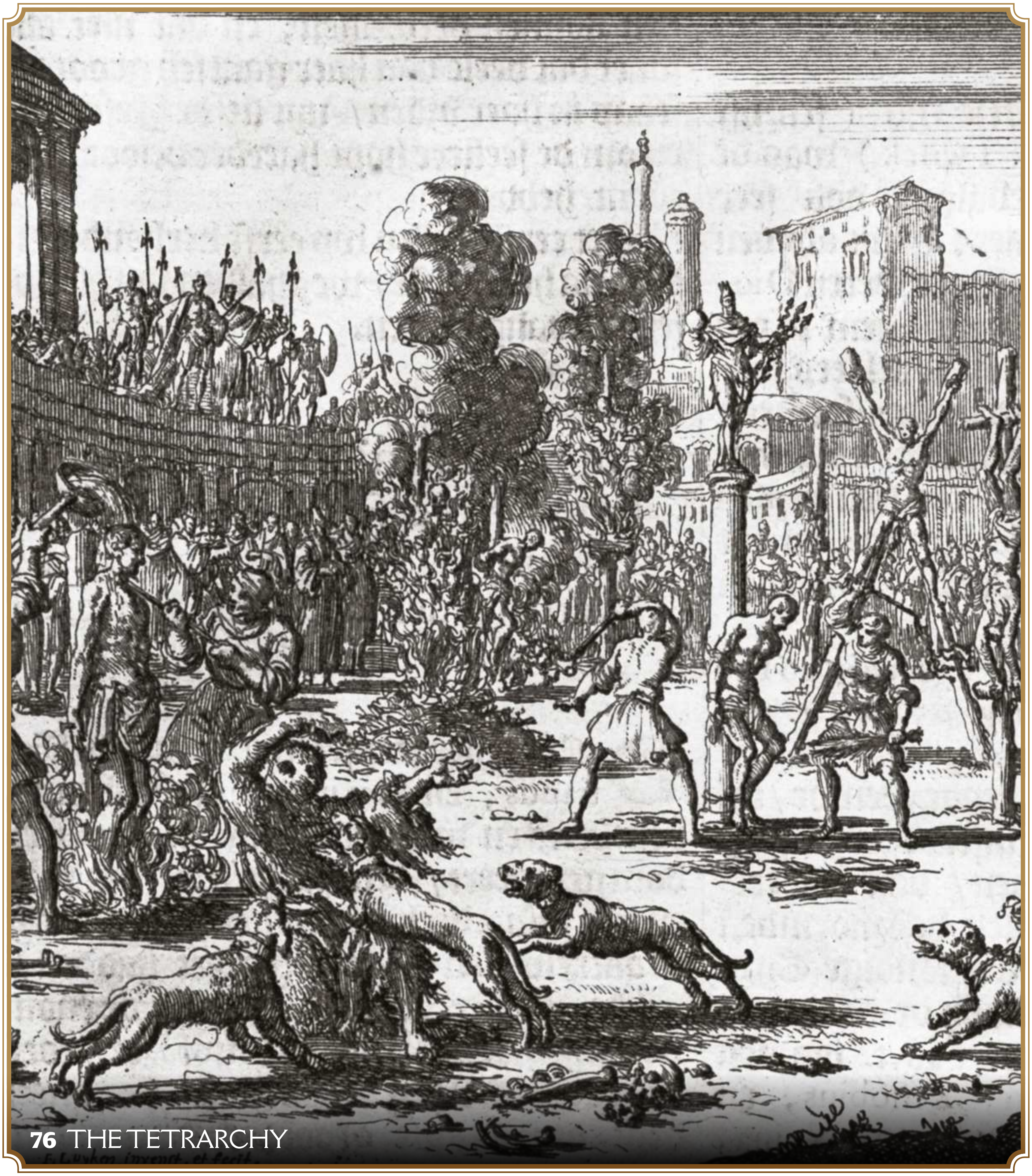
In a century marred by crisis and death, find out who managed to come out on top

64 THE SEVERANS

66 THE CRISIS OF THE THIRD CENTURY



72 DIOCLETIAN AND MAXIMIAN


J. Luyken invenit. et fecit.

THE SEVERAN DYNASTY

Following the Pax Romana, a new dynasty entered Roman politics. The Severans would leave behind a mixed legacy of greatness and madness – not unlike imperial families that had come before

JULIUS BASSIANUS

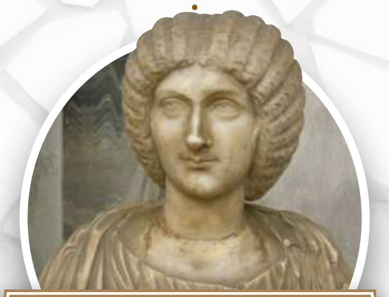
Dates unknown

By marrying his eldest daughter to Septimius Severus, this high priest of the Sun god Elagabal of Emesa in Syria would become grandfather and great-grandfather to emperors.

SEPTIMIUS SEVERUS

c.145-211 CE Reigned: 193-211 CE

Bringing with him a sense of stability after the tumultuous Year of the Five Emperors, Septimius Severus made his mark by increasing the size of the army, giving the soldiers a pay rise from 300 to 500 denarii, and allowing them to marry. After a reign of 18 years, he died in modern-day York, England.



JULIA DOMNA

c.170-217 CE

A wife and mother to emperors, Julia Domna enjoyed court life and surrounded herself with philosophers while also serving as 'mother of the Senate and the fatherland' under her son, Caracalla. However, when Caracalla was murdered, she apparently starved herself her death, although it's unknown if this was from grief or if she'd been ordered to by Macrinus, the new emperor.

PUBLIA FULVIA PLAUTILLA

c.187-211 CE

The marriage of Plautilla and Caracalla was short, and certainly not sweet. Just two years after their wedding, the bride's father was killed and Caracalla exiled his wife to Lipara, one of the Aeolian Islands. As soon as he became emperor, it is thought he sent an assassin to murder her.

CARACALLA

c.188-217 CE Reigned: 211-217 CE

Caracalla's perhaps most lasting legacy has been the Constitutio Antoniniana, which gave Roman citizenship to all free inhabitants of the empire. By doing this he was able to create a larger tax base, and the edict also created a new upper and lower class division.

GETA

c.189-211 CE Reigned: 209-211 CE

Made co-ruler by his father in 209 CE, Geta would hardly outlive him. After Severus died in 211 CE, Geta was eventually murdered by his brother Caracalla, who then became emperor.

JULIA PAULA

Dates unknown

Married to Elagabalus in 219 CE, Julia Paula was the first wife of the emperor and had the title of Augusta bestowed upon her, although the match only lasted about a year. Before her wedding she had been known as the daughter of the Praetorian prefect Julius Paulus.

AQUILIA SEVERA

Dates unknown

Elagabalus' second marriage caused quite the scandal as he divorced his first wife in order to wed a Vestal Virgin – a Roman priestess who couldn't marry and was sworn to celibacy. Cassius Dio wrote that he married her "in order that godlike children might spring from me". They later married again.

ANNIA FAUSTINA

c.201-222 CE

The third wife of Emperor Elagabalus, Annia Faustina was a noblewoman from Anatolia who claimed descent from the emperor Marcus Aurelius. However, when their marriage collapsed she was cast aside in favour of Elagabalus' third wife, Aquilia Severa.

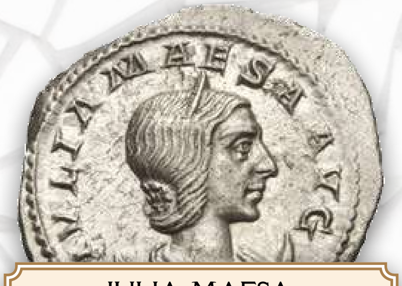
> "In a reign marked by uprisings and invasions, Severus Alexander had to keep on top of everything"

A BRIEF INTERLUDE

After Caracalla, the Severans had a break from the imperial throne

When Caracalla was assassinated, it was heavily believed that a man called Macrinus was behind the plot. While this may have been slander, it worked out well for the soldier – he was proclaimed emperor in April 217 CE. He made his son, Diadumenianus, his heir, and he managed to get a peace treaty signed with Parthia, which Caracalla had been trying to do before he was killed. Macrinus was on top of the world.

But rebellion was brewing. Julia Maesa, Caracalla's aunt, wanted the Severan dynasty restored and she'd stop at nothing to achieve her aim. The people, the Senate and the army were drawn to her side. Macrinus and his son were killed, and the Severans were restored under Elagabalus. Little did they know the division he would bring.



JULIA MAESA

c.165-224 CE

After the death of Septimius Severus, Julia Maesa's aim was to get one of her grandsons onto the imperial throne. She launched a successful rebellion and the reign of Elagabalus began. She died shortly after the succession of another grandson, Severus Alexander, and he deified her.

JULIUS AVITUS ALEXIANUS

c.155-217 CE

While little is known of the man who was grandfather of two emperors, we do know that he worked his way up the political hierarchy to the consulship, and that he served in the Roman Army in Britain and Parthia.

SEXTUS VARIUS MARCELLUS

c.165-215 CE

Father of Elagabalus, Marcellus would never see his son rule as emperor. He served as procurator of Rome's water supply and Britain before taking charge of the private finances of emperors Caracalla and Geta.

JULIA SOAEMIAS

c.180-222 CE

Being the mother of an emperor was tough – especially when it was Elagabalus. Unable to keep her son in check, she was murdered alongside him in March 222 CE.

JULIA MAMAEA

c.180-235 CE

After the death of her mother, Julia Mamaea achieved a first in the Roman Empire – she was bestowed the title consors imperii, which made her the first officially recognised empress of the Roman Empire. However, she would later be murdered alongside her son Severus Alexander in Mainz.

GESSIUS MARCIANUS

Unknown-218 CE

A member of the equestrian class in Syria, Gessius Marcianus married Julia Mamaea. Some have suggested that this match was made to strengthen Septimius Severus' power in the east.

ELAGABALUS

c.204-222 CE Reigned: 218-222 CE

A priest of Elagabal the Sun god before he became emperor, Elegabalus' rule would go on to be defined by the deity. He brought the cult of Elagabal to Rome against the wishes of his people, and hardly anyone joined. When he was just 18, he was assassinated by his Praetorian Guard along with his mother, Julia Soaemias.

SEVERUS ALEXANDER

c.208-235 CE Reigned: 222-235 CE

In a reign marked by uprisings and invasions, Severus Alexander had to keep on top of everything or lose his throne. In the end, he and his mother, Julia Mamaea, were murdered in Mainz by soldiers from the II Parthica and XXII Primigenia legions.

SALLUSTIA ORBIANA

Unknown

Although married to the emperor, when Sallustia Orbiana's father alledgedly staged a coup in 227 CE, she was exiled to Africa for the rest of her life.

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THE CRISIS OF THE THIRD CENTURY

The 3rd century was a time of murder, betrayal and revolution, as Rome's imperial purple went up for grabs to whoever was bold enough to seize it

Written by **Hareth Al Bustani**

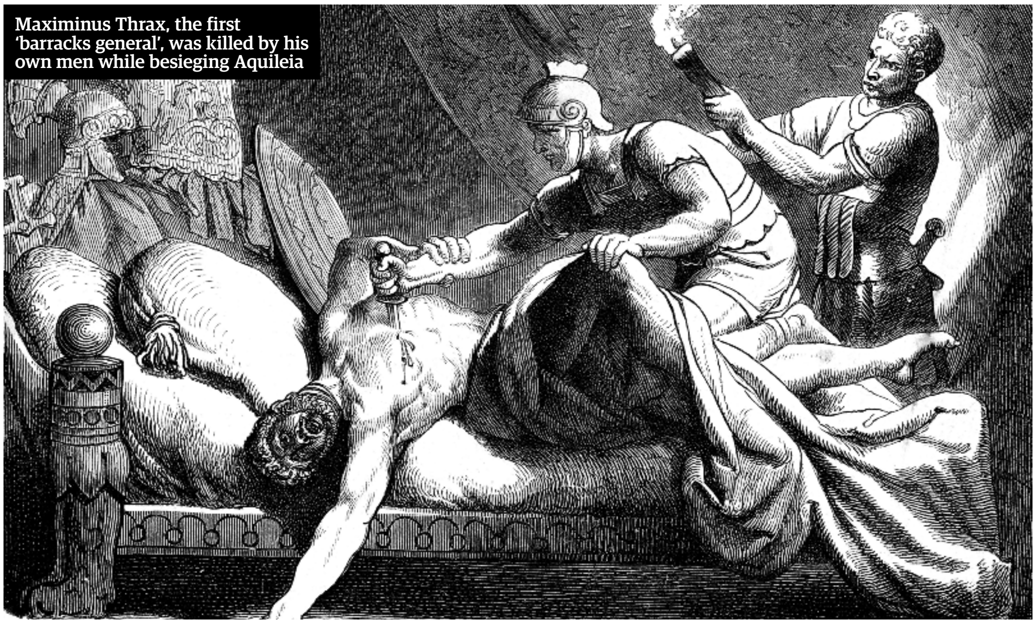
In 235 CE, Severus Alexander, the last of the Severan Dynasty, was murdered by a group of his own soldiers, led by his Thracian general, Maximinus Thrax. After 13 years of sole rule, the military had risen against its master, declaring for one of their own - a man who had clawed his way from the bottom through his ability alone.

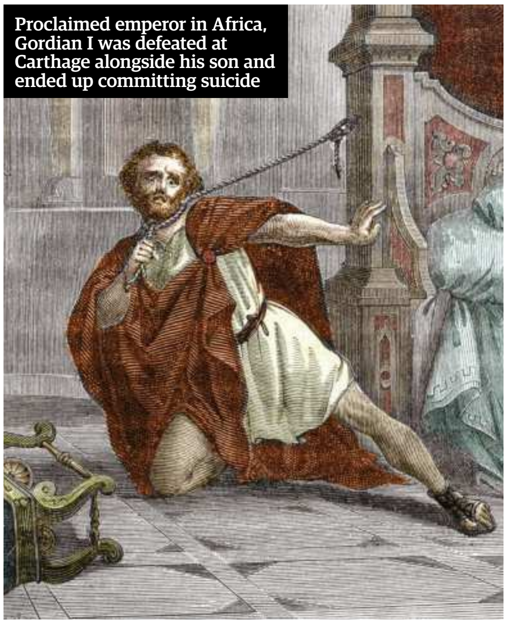
Though the Senate viewed Maximinus as a barbarian, unfit for the purple, with no alternative, they confirmed his appointment as emperor. Eager to appease his men, who had loathed Alexander's decision to bribe the Alamanni away from the northern frontiers, Maximinus immediately declared war on them.

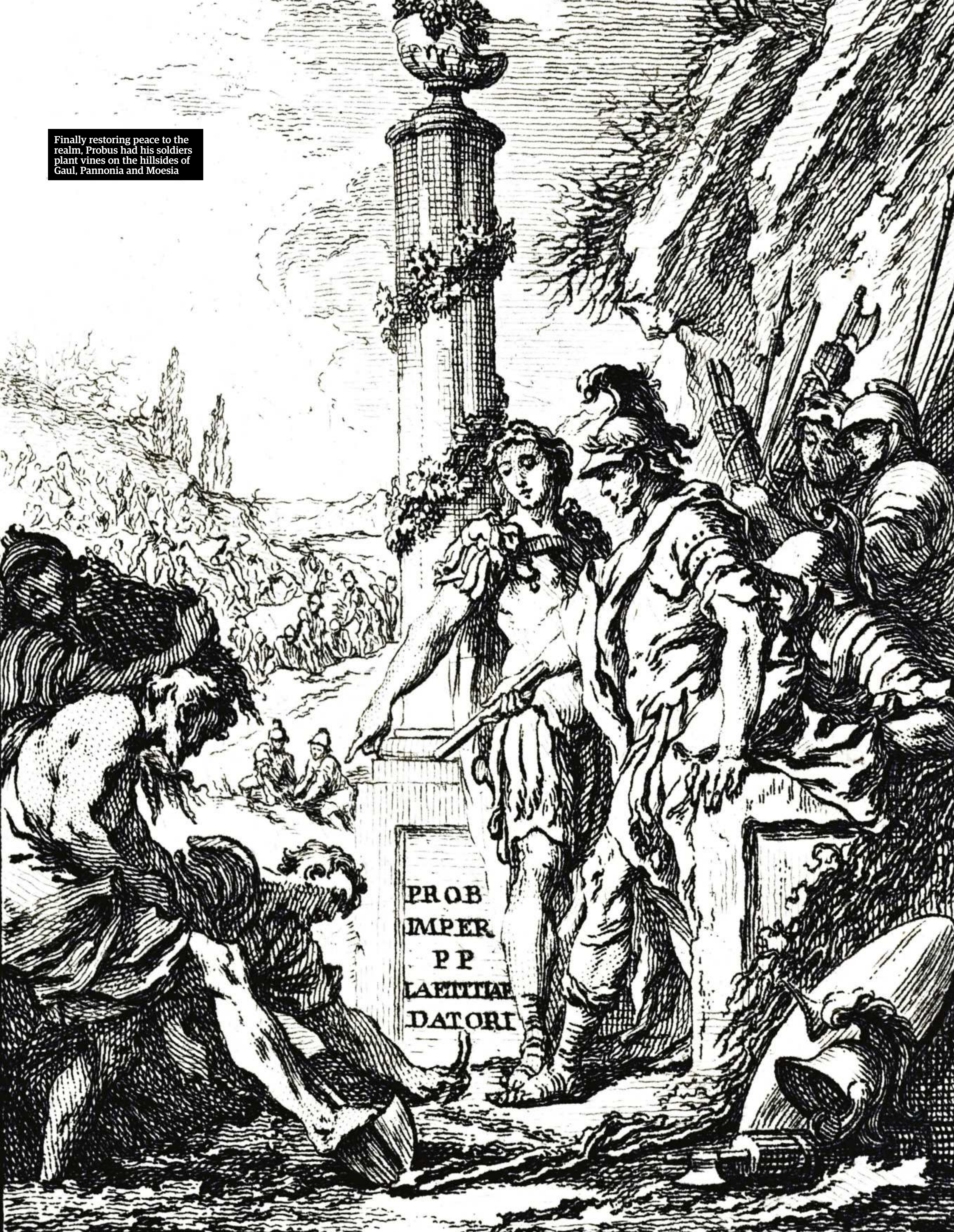
However, not all the troops along the Rhine and Danube were taken by their new leader. Quartinus, a friend of Alexander, was proclaimed emperor, and then killed, by the Osroenian archers in Upper Mesopotamia. Another group failed to replace Maximinus with a senator by the name of Magnus. Eager to stem the tide of sedition, Maximinus appointed his son Caesar and demoted Alexander's closest allies, while sparing their lives.

Instead of returning to Rome to shore up support and woo the senate, he continued leading his army against the northern tribes - alienating himself from noble and common citizen alike. He gave his soldiers a pay rise, financed by levying huge taxes across the empire. In Tunisia, a group of wealthy nobles revolted, killing a procurator and appointing an emperor of their own - the 79-year-old proconsul Gordian I, who shared the title with his son, Gordian II.

In Maximinus' absence, the Senate damned his memory and declared for the Gordians. The Praetorian prefect was assassinated and the capital's prefect was torn apart by a mob. However, the Gordians too were attacked at Carthage by the governor of Numidia, with the younger killed in battle and his father committing suicide. In their place the Senate elected 20 of its most esteemed members to form a temporary government


Maximinus Thrax, the first 'barracks general', was killed by his own men while besieging Aquileia


Proclaimed emperor in Africa, Gordian I was defeated at Carthage alongside his son and ended up committing suicide



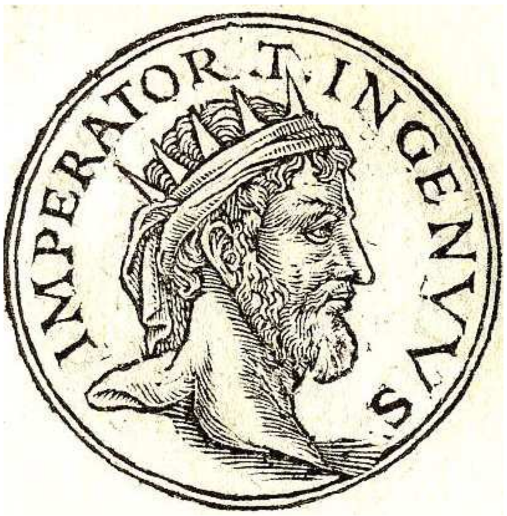
Finally restoring peace to the realm, Probus had his soldiers plant vines on the hillsides of Gaul, Pannonia and Moesia

PROB
IMPER
PP
LAETITIAE
DATORI

An Iranian rock relief at Naqsh-e Rustam depicts Shapur's victories over Valerian and Philip the Arab

before selecting two of them to rule as joint emperors: Pupienus and Balbinus. At the urging of the Praetorian Guard, Gordian II's nephew was nominated Caesar.

Outraged, Maximinus marched from the Danube towards Italy, laying siege to Aquileia, where, hungry and disillusioned, his men murdered him and his son. Pupienus took command of the army, sending them back home while keeping the Germans as his personal bodyguard – a move that isolated Balbinus and aroused the suspicion of the Praetorian Guard. Rather than risk being replaced, the Guard stormed the palace, stripping the two emperors naked, dragging them through the streets and torturing them to death. Afterwards they declared 13-year-old Gordian III emperor.



The usurper Ingenuus was proclaimed emperor at Illyricum, killing Gallienus' son before being murdered by his own soldiers

Finally, the empire seemed to have a ruler both the military and nobles could agree upon. Eager to refill the treasury, the empire tightened up the army, disbanding the legion responsible for the deaths of the first two Gordians. Though this made way for the rebellion of Sabianus in Carthage, he was quelled by the governor of Mauretania.

However, the peace would not last. While Gaul and Germany were ravaged by the Goths, to the east the Persian king Ardashir had capitalised on Rome's chaos and now loomed over Syria. In 241 CE, Gordian's Praetorian prefect, Timesitheus, married his daughter to the emperor. After quashing the Goths and German tribes plaguing Illyricum, he travelled east with Gordian, attacking the Persians in 243 CE. However, having won numerous battles he died at the peak of the conflict, and Gordian marched into the Persian capital of Ctesiphon with the new prefect, Philip the Arab. Whether murdered or slain in battle, Gordian soon died, and Philip was nominated his successor.

Keen to withdraw from Persia, Philip settled a peace treaty, giving him Osroene and Mesopotamia for 500,000 denarii. Returning west, he made his brother Priscus prefect of Mesopotamia and governor of Syria, where he earned a reputation of being "intolerably evil". Back in Rome, Philip appointed his son as Augustus in 247 CE, before deifying his father Marinus – an unprecedented move for a man who had never been emperor.

Philip's rule proved popular with the Senate, as he defended the Danube against the Carpi and Quadi and celebrated the Secular Games, commemorating the first millennium of Rome. Emboldened, he ceased paying the Goths subsidies, and when they responded by invading Moesia and Thrace, two generals broke out in rebellion. On the Danube, Pacatianus, the commander of Pannonia and Moesia, was pronounced emperor by his men and minted coins in his name. Meanwhile, Jotapianus was declared emperor in Cappadocia and similarly issued his own coinage.

Overwhelmed, Philip offered to resign but the senator Trajan Decius reassured him, leading to the campaign against Pacatianus. When Decius defeated the rebel, who was killed by his own men, his army proclaimed him emperor. In the ensuing civil war, Decius emerged supreme and Philip was killed. Back in Rome, in order to simplify matters, the Praetorians ruthlessly murdered Philip's 11-year-old son.

When Decius was confirmed emperor in 249 CE, hoping to bring his people together, he re-embraced the traditional Roman religion, reviving rituals and restoring temples. Conversely, he banned any cult he considered detrimental to Roman unity - most notoriously Christianity. Christians across the empire were ordered to make sacrifices to the Roman gods or face execution.

In 250 CE the Carpi invaded Dacia and the Goths attacked Moesia. Having defeated the Carpi, Decius nominated his son Herennius Etruscus a fellow Augustus and left his younger son Hostilianus in Rome with the esteemed senator Valerian. Regardless, the Romans rose up in rebellion against their absent emperor, nominating the senator Licinianus his replacement. Though this informal claim was quickly suppressed, Decius and Herennius Etruscus were killed chasing the Goths into modern Bulgaria. The legions pronounced the governor of Moesia, Gallus, the new emperor.

Desperate to get back to Rome, Gallus resumed payments to the Goths and let them make off with their booty and slaves. Back in the capital he adopted Hostilianus, making him and his biological son joint Augusti. In 252 CE the empire was decimated by a plague, which killed Hostilianus, and Ardashir's son Shapur then mounted a fresh invasion. As Nisibis and Antioch fell, the Syrians turned to Uranius Antoninus, who minted his own coins but soon faded into obscurity.

More significantly, along the Danube in Lower Moesia, the soldiers proclaimed the governor Aemilius Aemilianus emperor. Aemilianus once again ceased payments to the Goths and defeated them before writing to the Senate proposing a power-share. As the usurper marched towards Rome, Gallus sent Valerian and the Rhine legions to deal with him, but they instead declared Valerian emperor. Panicked, Gallus' men killed him and his son, and Aemilianus' army followed suit.

After decades of chaos, Valerian knew the empire's problems were far too great for any one man to cope with. Nominating his son Gallienus joint emperor, he rode east to Antioch to fight off the Persians, while Gallienus went to secure the Rhine and Danube from Germanic barbarians.

After a brief family reunion in Cologne in 257 CE, Valerian launched a violent persecution of the Christians before travelling back to the eastern frontier. In 260 CE, with Gallienus preparing to battle the Alemanni from Milan, Valerian's army was annihilated at Edessa. Foolishly, he agreed to meet Shapur only to be kidnapped and taken to Persia. In the wake of this ultimate humiliation the powder keg exploded.

In Illyricum, the general Ingenuus was proclaimed emperor and proceeded to kill Gallienus' son, Valerian the Younger, before being murdered by his own men. With the east crumbling, Gallienus left Cologne in the hands of his younger son Saloninus, along with his advisor Silvanus. In his absence the Goths laid waste to the Black Sea coast while the Alamanni surged into Germany and Rhaetia. Elsewhere, in Pannonia, the locals nominated the general Regalianus their emperor only to then lose their chosen ruler to the invading Sarmatians.

In Syria, Valerian's crippled former logistical officer Macrianus named his two sons, Macrianus Minor and Quietus, joint Augusti. Simultaneously, in Gaul, the Batavian general Postumus was nominated emperor by his men, murdering Silvanus and Saloninus and forming the Gallic Empire alongside Britain and Spain.

Facing multiple fronts, Gallienus reformed the military, amalgamating all his cavalry under the leadership of a single trusted general, Aureolus, in Milan. He also appointed equestrians rather than senators into high office and began to debase his currency, leading to a huge spike in inflation.

Aureolus intercepted and killed Macrianus Major and Minor in Pannonia, while Quietus was killed by the Palmyrene general Odaenathus. Mussius Aemilianus, a supporter of the Macriani, had no choice but to declare for himself in Egypt but was

Decius, one of the century's senatorial emperors, launched a violent persecution of the Christians and was killed fighting the Goths

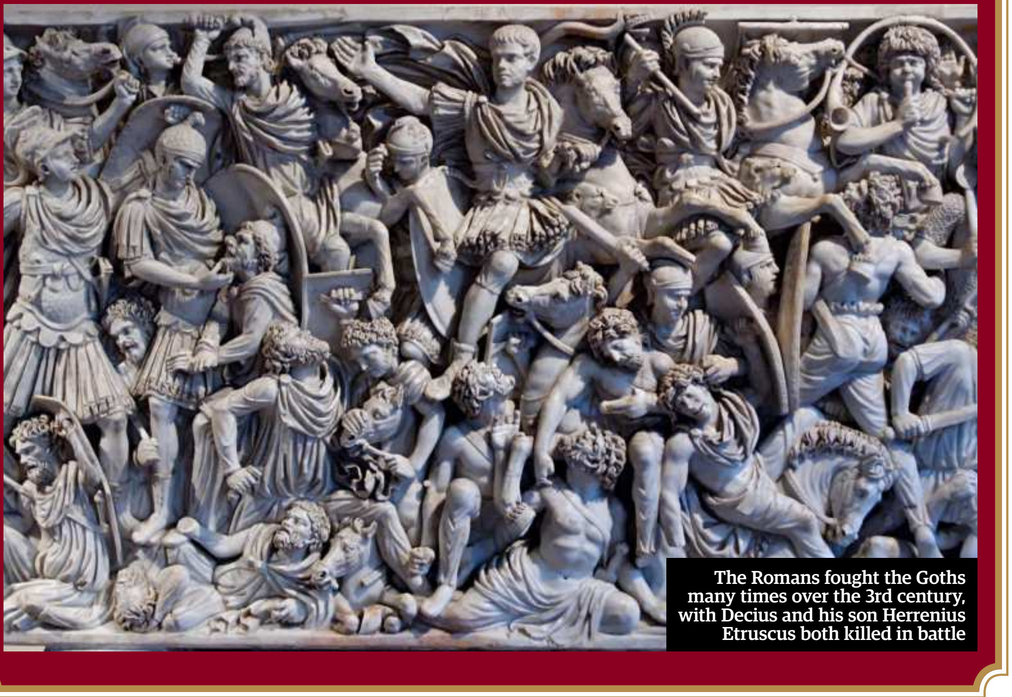
MEET THE BARBARIANS

Rome loosely referred to the unsettled tribes beyond its borders as 'barbarians' – people who, they traditionally believed, lived a life of raping and pillaging. However, these groups were far from homogenous, with each possessing distinctive leadership structures, languages and lifestyles.

They had also been assimilated into the Roman army, and even society. The Gauls, who had once sacked Rome, played a crucial role in the armies of the 3rd century, as did Palmyrene archers. Postumus even recruited Franks to fight against other Franks.

As such, Rome's relationship with its bordering tribes was complex at best, ebbing between co-operation and conflict, usually depending on how strong the empire was. A hallmark of Roman diplomacy was to ally with client kings, gifting them cash, supplies, food, experts or other payments in kind.

In the 3rd century, the empire had a notoriously difficult time with its neighbouring tribes, who had begun to form large confederations, chiefly the Germanic Alemanni and Franks along the Upper and Lower Rhine, the Vandals along the Danube, and the newly encountered Goths. Other tribes included the Germanic Juthungi, Marcomanni and Quadi north of the Danube, the Black Sea Heruli, as well as the Carpi and the Sarmatians, originally from Iran.


The Romans fought the Goths many times over the 3rd century, with Decius and his son Herrenius Etruscus both killed in battle

> "At his most glorious moment, for which he was named Parthicus Maximus, he died suddenly"

promptly dealt with. Having been named governor of all the east, Odaenathus was later murdered, leaving his wife, Zenobia, ruling as queen regent. Presiding over a powerful polity in its own right, she declared independence.

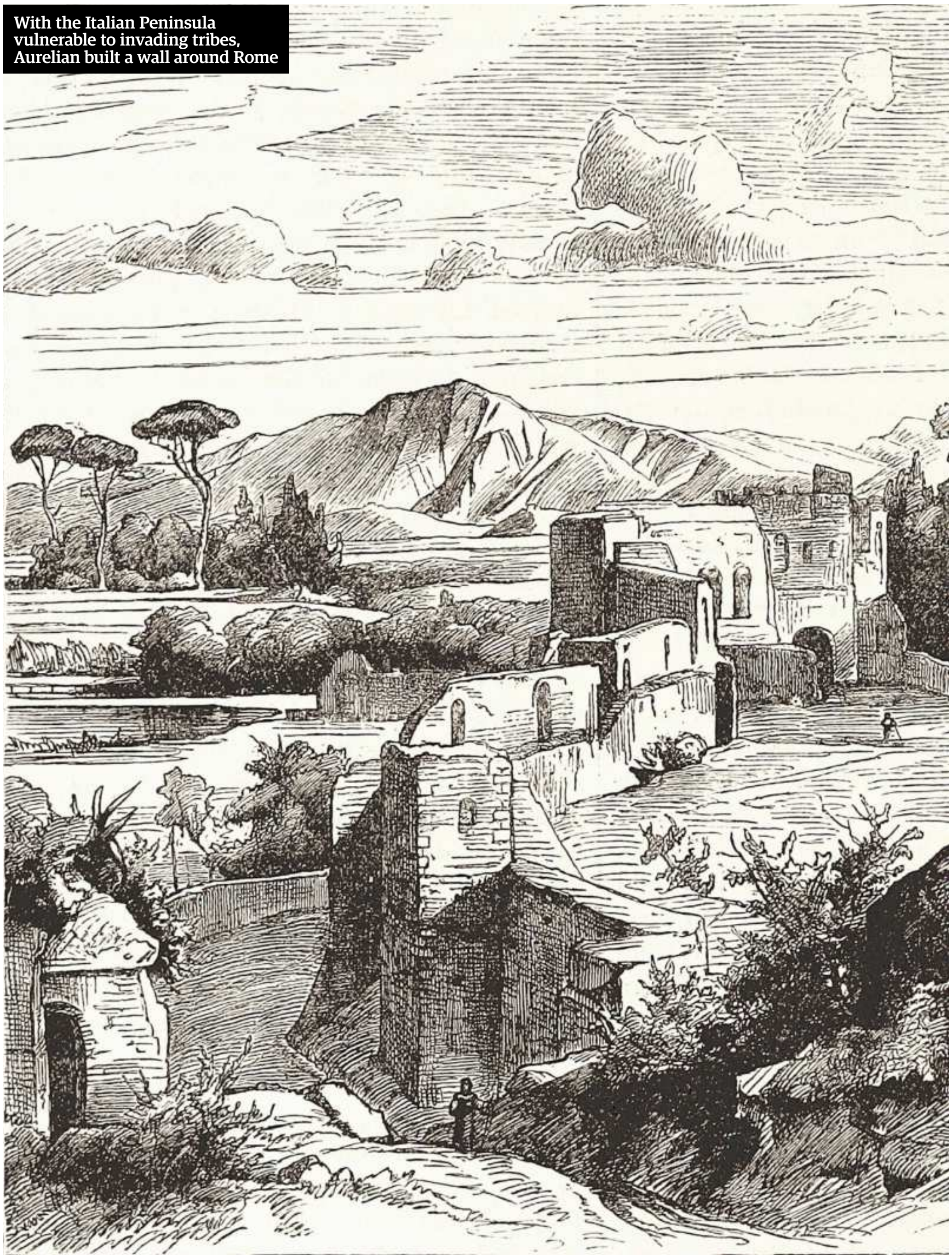
With Gallienus busy dealing with the barbarians assaulting Thrace, Athens, Sparta, Corinth and Thessalonica, Aureolus suddenly rose up in revolt. As Gallienus lay siege to Milan, one of his commanders raised a false alarm and murdered him. Postumus, too, would be killed by his followers for the crime of refusing to let them sack a conquered city.

Gallienus was replaced by Claudius II, a general who may have played a role in his master's death. When Aureolus handed himself over, expecting mercy, he was promptly put to the sword. Claudius silenced any dissent with generous donatives and later rushed to Rome to have Gallienus deified. While Zenobia had swept through Syria and Egypt – taking over Rome's bread basket – Claudius had more pressing matters to attend to.

Having recently discovered ships, the Goths had amassed an army of 300,000 that they were now readying to unleash on the Romans. The two sides clashed at the Battle of Naissus, with Claudius annihilating the Goths and earning himself the name Claudius Gothicus.

After defeating the Alemanni at Lake Garda, he received the additional title of Germanicus Maximus. However, in 270 CE, while fighting against the Juthungi and Vandals near the Danube, the emperor succumbed to the plague, but not before nominating his brother Quintillus as his successor. The soldiers, meanwhile, declared for Aurelian, one of Claudius' most senior officers, who was busy fighting the Vandals and Juthungi – news so shocking Quintillus supposedly slit his wrists.

Aurelian immediately began minting gold coins to give to his men. His reputation preceded him; he was nicknamed manu ad ferrum, or 'sword in hand', for his martial vigour and unapologetic resolve. He defeated the Juthungi, taking 40,000 horsemen and 80,000 soldiers before letting them return home. Meanwhile, he destroyed the land



With the Italian Peninsula vulnerable to invading tribes, Aurelian built a wall around Rome

Although Emperor Gallus hurried back to Rome to shore up support, when Valerian's army declared for him he was murdered around the Vandals, starving them out, and later demanded 2,000 horsemen in return for food and safe passage.

Returning to Rome, he quashed a mint workers' revolt before suppressing the rebellions of the usurpers Septiminus, Domitianus and Urbanus. In the capital, he handed out money to the masses and cancelled all debts to the treasury, burning records, before raising taxes on the wealthy. He stripped the Senate of their legislative powers and even their authority to issue coinage. After chasing the Juthungi out of Italy, he also built a wall around Rome, creating a serious deterrent to invading tribesmen without the means to mount a siege.

When Zenobia's son, Vaballathus, proclaimed himself emperor in Palmyra, Aurelian knew it was time to act. Heading east, he wiped out the Goths while one of his generals retook Egypt. He clashed with Zenobia just east of Antioch, where, utilising a false retreat, he ambushed and decimated the enemy's heavy cavalry. After another victory at Emesa, he besieged Palmyra itself and captured Zenobia en route to Persia.

On the way back west he defeated the Carpi on the Danube before returning east to defeat a Palmyrene rebellion. This time he razed the city to the ground before wiping out a similar revolt in Egypt and punishing the locals by raising taxes.

Following the death of Postumus, his successors Marius and Victorinus were both murdered. The final Gallic emperor, Tetricus, betrayed his empire to Aurelian, begging him to relieve him of his duty. In the meantime another pretender, Faustinus, popped up at Trier, but he did not last long. After defeating the Gallic Empire at Châlons-sur-Marne, Aurelian was proclaimed Restorer of the World, holding a great triumph at Rome where he paraded Zenobia and Tetricus in chains.

In recognition of his accomplishments Aurelian was named a living god. Seeking to restore prestige to the purple, he wore a diadem, actively building his cult of personality. He introduced the Sun god, Sol, as the pre-eminent deity, rebranding traditional religion in the most inclusive manner possible. The emperor also attempted to revive the devastated economy, improving the quality of severely debased silver and gold currencies.

In 275 CE, with Persia weakened by a successional crisis, Aurelian turned his attention east. However, while marching through Thrace he fell victim to a conspiracy. An official had somehow convinced several army officers that the infamously stern emperor planned to kill them. Fearing the worst, as Aurelian left the city with a small guard they fell upon him, murdering the man who had saved the world.

At the urging of the army, the Senate nominated the elderly senator Tacitus his successor. He would die just six months later having scored several victories over the Goths. Simultaneously, his half-brother, Florian, a Praetorian prefect, and Probus, the commander of Syria, Phoenicia and Egypt, were both proclaimed emperor by their armies. The two clashed at Tarsus, where Florian was either killed by his own men or perhaps forced to commit suicide.

Claudius Gothicus carried on Gallienus' work, defeating the Goths and the Alemanni before dying of the plague

Probus secured the Rhine and Danube, rebuilding damaged cities and forts and allegedly defeating nine barbarian kings. Hoping to secure a lasting peace, he settled the tribes inside the empire with mixed results. Probus had to put down rebellions in Africa, as well as a usurper called Saturninus, who was declared emperor in Syria or Egypt. Two more pretenders, Bonosus and Proculus, were dealt with at Cologne.

Having defeated usurpers, pirates and brigands alike, Probus enjoyed a triumph in 281 CE. He had his men plant vines and work on drainage systems, indicating that peace had perhaps come at last. Like Aurelian, having strengthened the empire, he decided to have another go at the Persians, and, like his predecessor, he was promptly assassinated before the campaign even began.

His replacement was Carus, a Praetorian prefect in Rhaetia and Noricum who had already risen up in rebellion. The men sent to put him down instead joined his cause and proclaimed him emperor in 282 CE. Without paying lip service to the Senate, he elevated his sons Carinus and Numerian to joint Augusti, sending Carinus to the west and Numerian to the east.

With the Persians in no position to resist, Carus marched all the way to Ctesiphon. However, at his most glorious moment, for which he was named Parthicus Maximus, he died suddenly. During the retreat west, his son Numerian also died.

Though fanciful, tradition dictates that the Praetorian prefect Aper kept Numerian's death a secret so he could seize power, but he was betrayed by the stench of his master's corpse.

Numerian was instead replaced by the commander of his guard, Diocles, who personally executed Aper in front of his men, fulfilling a prophecy that he would one day become emperor; an emperor who would forever change the face of an empire dragged to hell and back.

DIOCLETIAN & MAXIMIAN

After decades of political turmoil that approached the level of anarchy, two old army pals sought to restore the empire's fortunes

Written by Jon Wright

In 289, an anonymous orator launched into one of those astonishingly sycophantic panegyrics that had always been lavished on Roman emperors. With a focus on Maximian, co-emperor of Diocletian, the orator raced through a list of "the victories which exalted your reputation", praised the emperor's "divine foresight", and concluded that, with Maximian on the scene, even Alexander the Great "now seems insignificant to me". Better yet, he had the greatest of allies in Diocletian: "The harmony between you is ever increasing and you are brothers in virtue, which is a surer tie than any tie of blood." Things certainly seemed to be looking brighter in 289 than during the dark days of the so-called Crisis of the Third Century. Though, beyond the rhetoric, troubles still lay ahead.

It had all begun with Diocletian. Born in around the year 244 in Dalmatia, Diocletian had humble roots. He was known as Diocles back then, only adopting the more glamorous Latinate name of Diocletian after becoming emperor. He rose swiftly through the military, reaching the rank of cavalry commander and acquitting himself well in battle.

The empire's descent into chaos turned out to be Diocletian's golden opportunity. Following the death of Carus, Numerian (one of his sons) was assassinated. Diocletian killed the alleged assassin, Aper (a Praetorian prefect and Numerian's father-in-law). Earlier in life, a druidess had predicted that Diocletian would become emperor if he slayed a boar. Aper turned out to be the boar and, on the very same day in 284, he was proclaimed as emperor by his troops. This did leave the small matter of Carus' other son, Carinus. Diocletian quickly announced that Carinus was a tyrant, headed west, and at the Battle of the Margus, in present-day Serbia, Carinus met his maker, killed by his own troops.

If we are to believe the sources, Diocletian's ascendancy came as a huge relief, and can be seen as marking the end of the turmoil that had blighted the previous decades. One poem, penned in 285, was particularly effusive: "Zeus took pity at last on the human race and gave the lordship of all the earth and the sea to godlike king Diocletian." He had "extinguished the memory of former griefs" and "the whole land takes delight in its joy as at the light of a golden age". As he began his rule, Diocletian behaved with restraint. There were no purges, and most officials and provincial governors were allowed to remain in office. The trouble was that Diocletian had to govern a huge empire, ranging from Gaul to Egypt, which was brimful of enemies. He turned to Maximian, with whom he had likely served on campaign, and appointed him as Caesar in 285. Within a year, Maximian was granted the loftier title of Augustus, and became a fully fledged co-emperor. He would watch over the western half of the empire, while Diocletian would focus on the east. In many ways, it was an imperial dream team: Diocletian was the better strategist and politician, while Maximian was the more able soldier. This was reflected in the terms often applied to them: Diocletian being wise Jove, and Maximian being Hercules, the man who could get things done. It is important to stress, however, that in many ways, Diocletian was the senior partner in the relationship, and the two men did not always get along.

> "Diocletian's ascendancy [marked] the end of the turmoil that had blighted the previous decades"

Things got off to an excellent start. Diocletian secured victories against old enemies like the Sarmatians, and even achieved détente with Persia. Bahram II, the Persian ruler, sent gifts, extended invitations for the 3rd-century equivalent of a state visit, and even allowed Diocletian control over Armenia. In the empire's western half, Maximian also made headway. He took on the Bagaudae of Gaul with some success, and confronted an array of Germanic tribes. The orator in 289 insisted that, in the wake of any victories, Maximian always tried to show clemency. He was faced by people set on "insane mutual destruction throughout the world," but while they were "suppressed by your bravery," they were "calmed by your mercy."

"Savage despotism" was the furthest thing from Maximian's mind. This was the kind of thing Roman crowds always liked to hear: the ideal soldier-emperor was supposed to be tough but fair. How far it reflects the reality is unclear, and subsequent events certainly cast doubt. The Germanic tribes refused to simmer down and, in the years up to 288, a ruthless, scorched-earth policy – crops and food set aflame – was adopted, with Diocletian travelling west to lend a hand in the carnage.

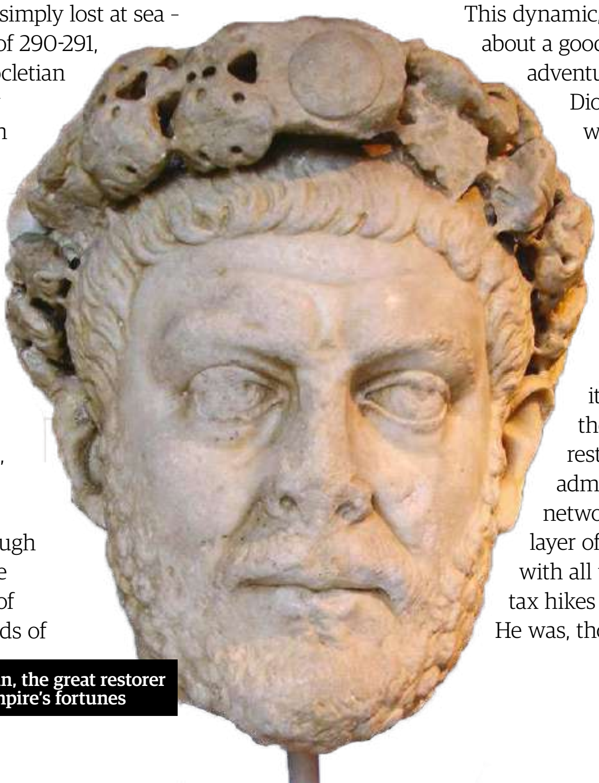
During this period a serious problem arose in another part of the empire. Maximian entrusted Carausius with the task of blotting out piracy in the seas above northern Gaul. Carausius did well but developed a bad habit of seizing the treasure and

Diocletian, emperor of Rome from 284 to 305 CE

The Camp at Palmyra in the Syrian desert: a major military headquarters

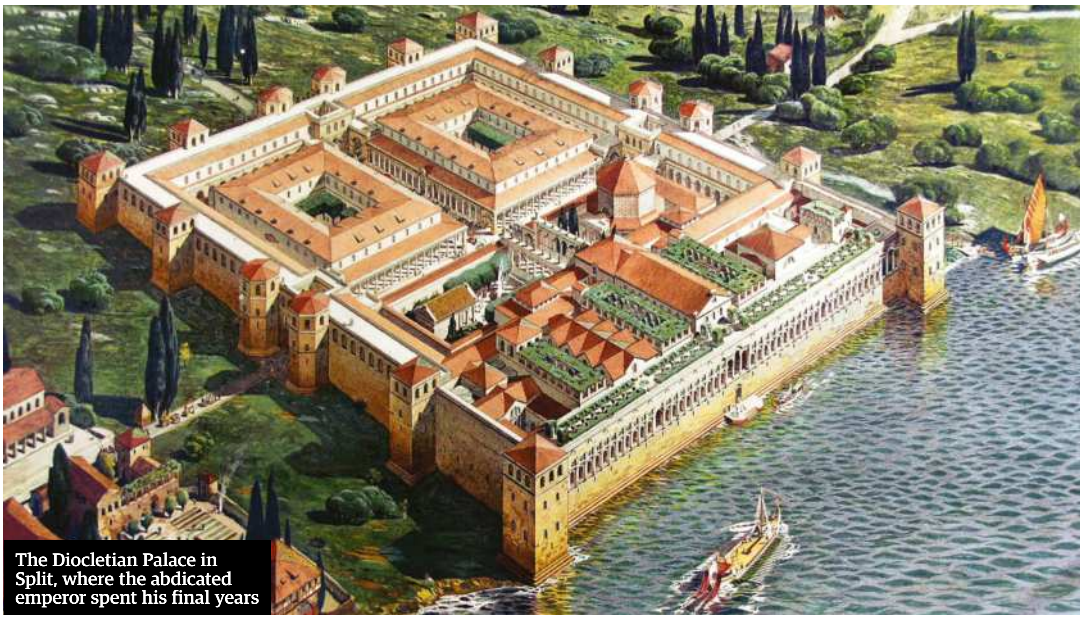
not returning it to its original owners. Maximian was displeased and ordered Carausius' death. In response, Carausius went over to Britain, declared that he was the true Augustus and launched an open rebellion. Support in Britain and parts of northern Gaul was easily won, and the empire had a potential usurper in its midst. An invasion plan against Carausius failed – it may be that the imperial fleet was simply lost at sea – and in the winter of 290-291, Maximian and Diocletian met in Milan (they would not see each other again until 303) to discuss strategy. They seem to have put on quite the show. By one account, when the two emperors rode through the city's streets "every man, woman, tiny child and aged person either ran out through their doors into the open or hung out of the upper thresholds of the house. All cried out with joy." It is likely that Maximian would have been willing to tolerate Carausius, so long as he limited his sphere of influence, but Diocletian was having none of it. This would be the spark that created the Tetrarchy, but more on that later. There was simply too much to do, so a couple more deputy-emperors were required, bringing the total to four.

This dynamic, if troubled period was about a good deal more than military adventure and misadventure. Diocletian, especially, was an extremely hard-working politician with a keen eye for detail. Censuses were taken and the empire's armies doubled in size, though some might say that Diocletian was a little too keen when it came to fine-tuning the empire's affairs. His restructuring of the imperial administration and provincial networks added layer upon layer of bureaucracy and, along with all the wars, resulted in tax hikes that pleased no one. He was, though, an avid builder



Diocletian, the great restorer of the empire's fortunes

The Baths of Diocletian in Rome, commissioned by the emperor in the late 3rd century and even the devastating wars produced useful improvements in roads, town walls and defences. The crowning achievement on the military front was the Ripa Sarmatia, a series of improved forts that stretched for 200 miles along the Danube: a necessary measure since parts of the river could freeze over in winter, making it all too easy for invaders to sneak across. The truly memorable architectural achievements had little to do with martial matters, however. The Diocletian Baths in Rome, commissioned by the emperor himself, were an astonishing sight, crammed with mosaics and sculptures, and able to accommodate some 3,000 people. Diocletian's huge palace at Split – his retirement home – was one of the wonders of the ancient world.


The Diocletian Palace in Split, where the abdicated emperor spent his final years

IMP MAXIMIANVS AVG
Maximian, Diocletian's co-emperor and a military success story, most of the time

Notable, also, is that the 'Roman' nature of the Roman Empire became increasingly insignificant. Diocletian did not set foot in the city until 303, and the old concept of the empire's centre being wherever the emperor happened to be situated took hold. Not that Diocletian's tenure would last forever. Under the Tetrarchy, he would continue his military exploits (engaging in renewed conflicts with the Sarmatians and Persians), confront revolts in Egypt, and inflict one of the worst periods of persecution on the fledgling Christian faith. The latter was particularly galling for his wife, Prisca, and daughter, Valeria, who appear to have had Christian sympathies. By 305, plagued by ill health, Diocletian would abdicate – a shocking event in the context of Roman history. He returned to his Dalmatian homeland and divided his time between periods of depression and happier moments tending to his gardens close by the Adriatic sea: vegetables were his chief passion. It was a long way from the imperial glory days when he wore a crown at every opportunity, forbade anyone else from wearing purple silk, and only allowed the highest and the mightiest to kiss his robes. Pruning had replaced the extraordinarily elaborate rules of protocol. Diocletian died, a broken man, on a date that historians have never been able to pin down with precision.

WIVES AND DAUGHTERS

Rather too frequently, the women in emperors' lives were treated as political pawns, and they could sometimes meet grizzly ends. Maximian and his wife Eutropia's daughter, Fausta, appeared to secure an enviable marriage – albeit one of political convenience – to Constantine the Great. Constantine was even willing to set aside his existing wife. It all ended rather badly, however, and Constantine would order Fausta's death: she was thrown into a vat of boiling water.

Diocletian's family did not fare any better in the long run. Wife Prisca and daughter Valeria had to live through the spectacle of Christian persecutions – they were sympathetic to the faith and perhaps even believers – and Valeria endured a very unhappy and childless marriage of convenience with Galerius. Following Diocletian's death, with the troubles of the Tetrarchy mounting, they embarked upon a constant search for refuge. Sadly, they were spotted in Thessaloniki, were beheaded, and had their bodies cast into the sea. High status carried its risks in the Roman Empire.

Fausta, the ill-fated daughter of Maximian

© Getty Images, Antmoose / Anthony M, Bernard Gagnon, G.dallorto, Mbzt, Rasiel Suarez

THE TETRARCHY

One emperor not enough? Let's have four

Written by Edoardo Albert

By the end of the 3rd century, the Roman Empire, long the colossus of the world, was tottering. It was beset by enemies from without and torn by division from within. The long series of crises that had preceded Diocletian's accession to the imperial throne had seen a succession of emperors reigning briefly, only to be cut down by assassins and usurpers.

The chief problem was that Rome was being assailed by powerful foes on different fronts: in the east, the Sasanian Empire, the last iteration of the various Persian Empires of ancient history, was a serious rival to Rome. Indeed, so powerful had the Sasanian Empire become that in 260 CE, its ruler Shapur defeated and captured Valerian, the emperor of Rome, holding him captive for the rest of his life. That an emperor might be treated in such a way was an extraordinary humiliation for Rome. Meanwhile, a seemingly endless succession of barbarian tribes were attempting to infiltrate across Rome's long northern frontier, while Germanic pirates were raiding the shores of the North Sea.

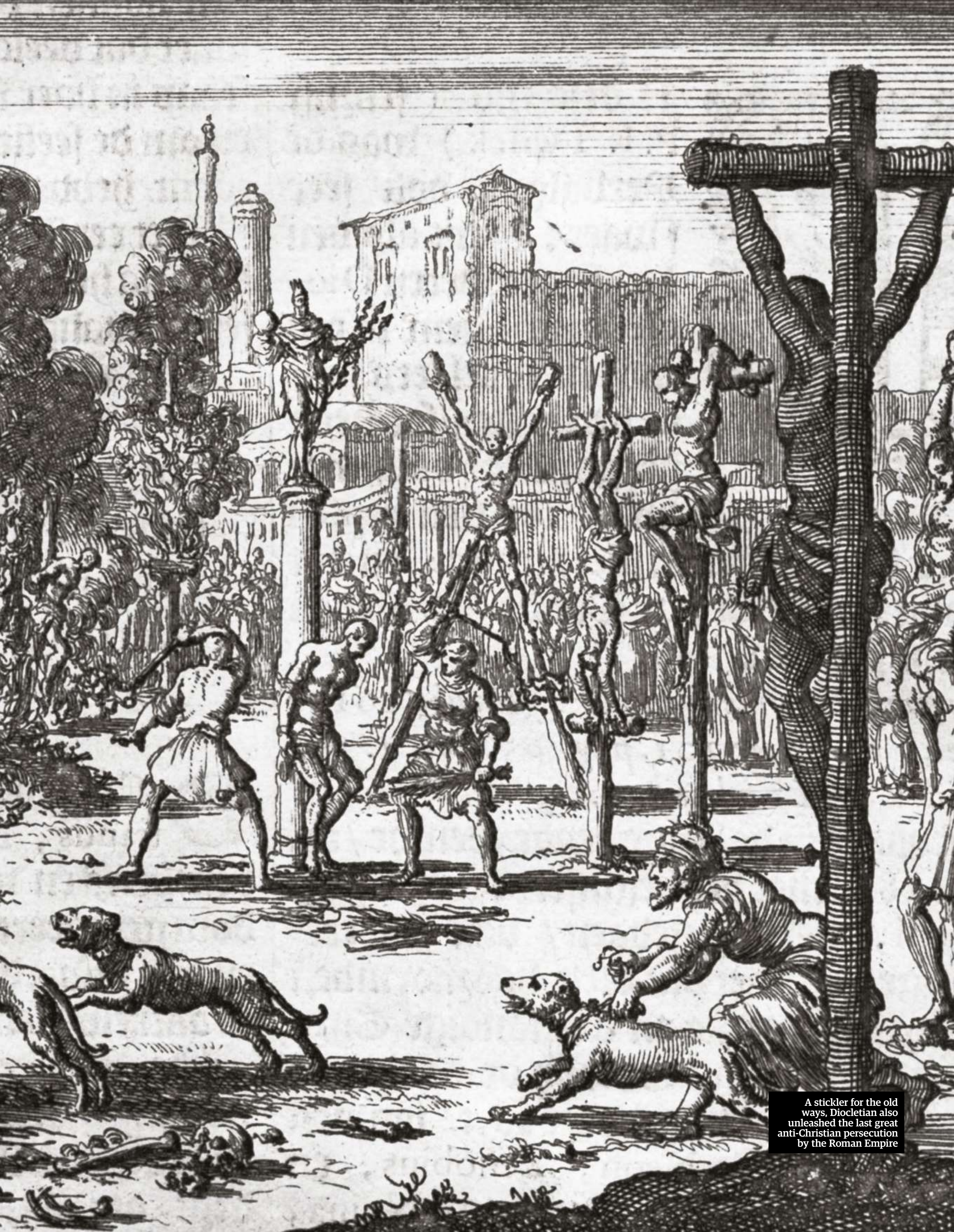
With so many enemies threatening the empire, the emperor essentially needed to be everywhere, for without his personal presence things simply did not get done. However, the multiple, widely separated enemies threatening Rome meant that sometimes he had to entrust legions to a general to deal with one threat while he faced another. The problem with this, though, was that a successful general might all too readily decide to make a play for the top job himself. For the legions that the general led, there was also an incentive to acclaim their general emperor: a successful bid for the purple would ensure that every man in the usurping general's army would be well rewarded for their support.

It was a recipe for chronic chaos and instability. This Diocletian, secure on the throne for the moment, saw with all the clarity of a man who had fought his way up from the depths of Roman society. For the empire to survive, it needed more emperors. So Diocletian made one. And then, when that worked, he added two more. That, in a nutshell, was the Tetrarchy, although the name itself is a much later invention.

"That an emperor might be treated in such a way was an extraordinary humiliation for Rome"

Maximian was the first co-ruler that Diocletian appointed, giving him the title Caesar (that is junior ruler) in 285 CE before making him Augustus (co-emperor) in 286. Maximian came from a background that was almost as humble as Diocletian's own – his family were shopkeepers and he had entered imperial service as a young man. Born around 250 CE, by 285 Maximian was a seasoned veteran who had learned his trade soldiering on Rome's frontiers in the war against aggressive Germanic tribes. Where Diocletian was the consummate politician, Maximian's interests did not stretch much further than the battlefield, making him the ideal candidate for co-ruler. There is also circumstantial evidence to suggest the two men were old colleagues.

Although the empire was beset on all sides, its chief enemies were the Sasanians in the east and the Germanic tribes in the north. Diocletian



A stickler for the old ways, Diocletian also unleashed the last great anti-Christian persecution by the Roman Empire

A relief from the Arch of Galerius shows the emperor attacking the Sassanid Shah Narses

took the rule of the eastern half of the empire for himself, while allotting the western half to be controlled by Maximian.

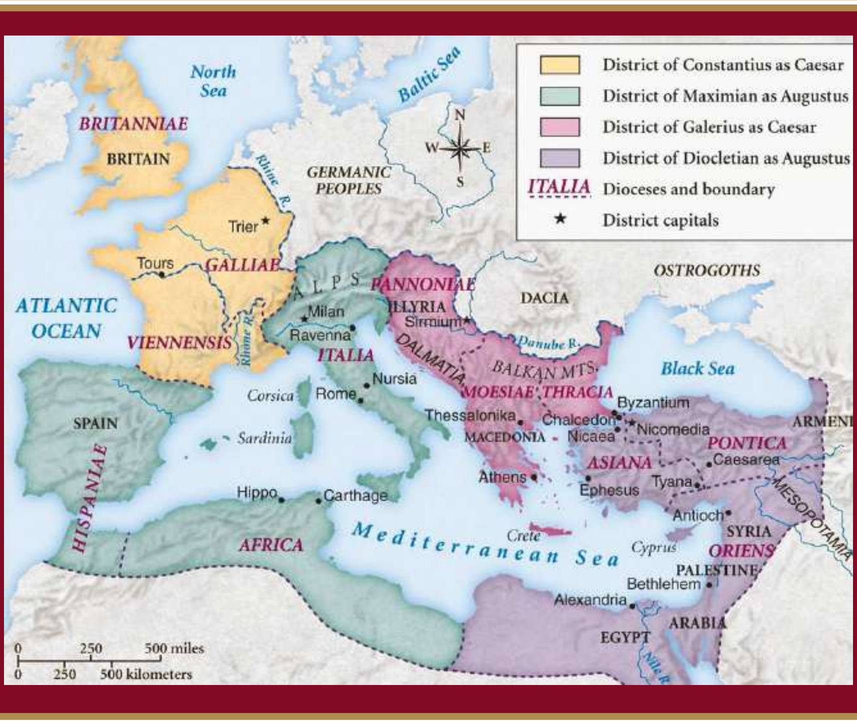
As ruler of the west, Maximian put down a revolt among the Gauls before returning to the Rhine frontier to deal with Germanic incursions. However, ship-born pirates, the Saxons, were causing havoc along the coasts of Britain and the Low Countries, so Maximian appointed Carausius as commander of the combined navy and army on what came to be called the Saxon Shore, giving him Maximian's own ships to deal with the threat. But, in an ironic recapitulation of the problems of the previous decades, Carausius' success led to his naming himself Augustus of an independent state in Britain. The rebel state would endure for ten years.

The relative success of the rule of two combined with the continuing issues of rebellion and invasion suggested to Diocletian that two emperors weren't actually enough: the empire needed more. So in 293 CE, the diarchy became a tetrarchy, with two Caesars appointed as junior rulers alongside the two senior Augusti. Galerius, born a herdsman, had risen through the ranks of the army and

THE TETRARCHY MAPPED

Who was in charge of what

The four tetrarchs each established regional headquarters. While the tetrarchs themselves led peripatetic existences campaigning against the empire's many enemies, their capitals became administrative and military centres. Rome remained the capital of the empire with a Prefect of the City. Diocletian, guarding the east against Rome's most dangerous enemy, the Sasanian Empire, made Nicomedia his capital (İzmit in Turkey). From there he could react to danger both from the Persians to the east and incursions across the Danube into Thracia. Galerius, Diocletian's Caesar, made Sirmium his capital (Sremska Mitrovica in Serbia), from where he guarded the Balkans and the Danube frontier. Maximian, Augustus of the West, made Mediolanum (Milan) his headquarters, from where he administered Italy, Spain and north Africa; his province was the one least affected by barbarian incursions. Finally, the Caesar of the west, Constantinus Chlorus, made his headquarters at Augusta Treverorum (Trier in Germany), near the strategic, and often crossed, Rhine border. Given the exigencies of warfare and statecraft, a Caesar might find himself campaigning in the territory of his Augustus, and vice versa. As the territories were more spheres of main influence rather than strict boundaries, this did not cause difficulties for the operation of the Tetrarchy.


District of Constantius as Caesar
District of Maximian as Augustus
District of Galerius as Caesar
District of Diocletian as Augustus
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VIENNENSIS
Rhone R.
ALPS
PANNONIAE
ILLYRIA
Sirmium
DACIA
OSTROGOTHS
Milan
Ravenna
ITALIA
DALMATIA
Danube R.
BALKAN MTS.
Black Sea
Nursia
Corsica
Rome
MOESIAE
THRACIA
Byzantium
SPAIN
Sardinia
Thessalonika
Chalcedon
Nicomedia
ARMENI
MACEDONIA
Nicaea
PONTICA
ASIANA
Caesarea
Athens
Ephesus
Tyana
MESOPOTAMIA
Hippo
Carthage
Antioch
SYRIA
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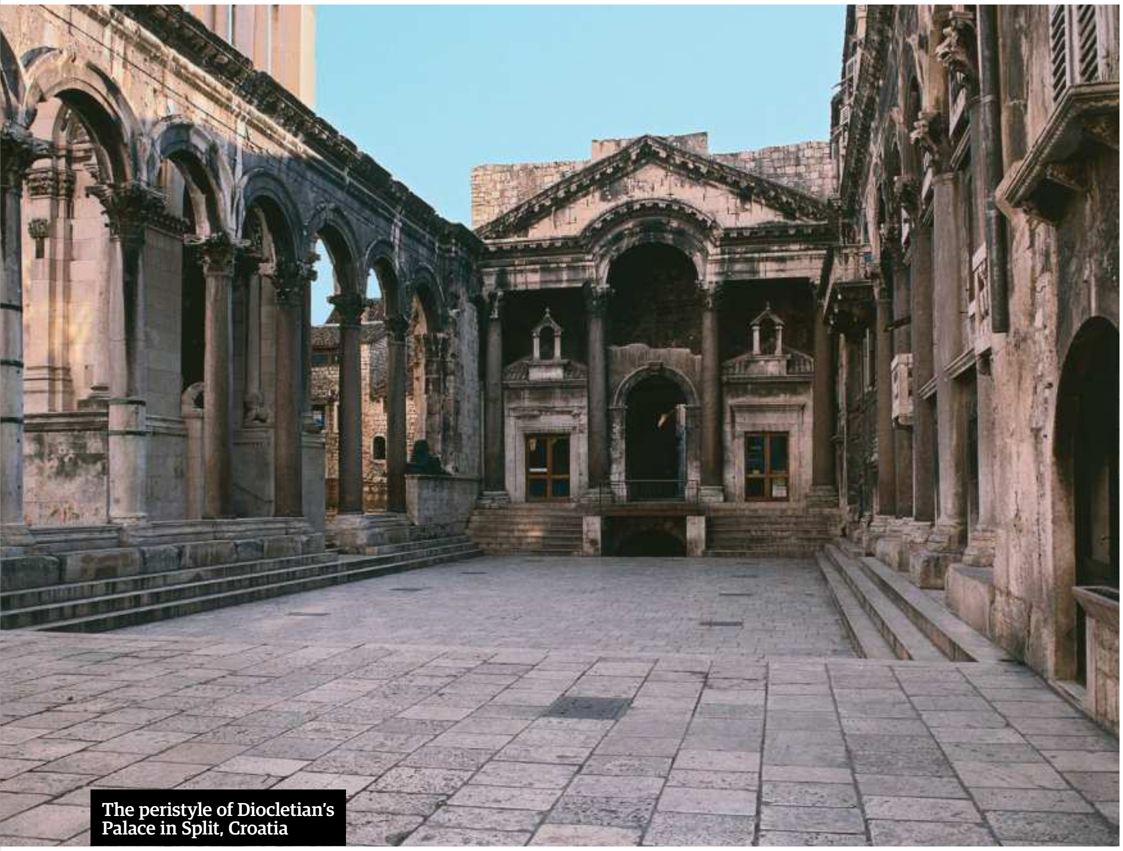


The peristyle of Diocletian's Palace in Split, Croatia

Diocletian adopted him as his Caesar, marrying his daughter to him and giving into his authority the Roman province of Iliyria (essentially the Balkans). Meanwhile, Maximian adopted Constantius Chlorus, who divorced his wife, Helena to marry Maximian's daughter. History, however, would prove Helena was not a woman to be put aside.

But while Diocletian had no sons, and therefore could not have his issue inherit the throne, Maximian did. His son was called Maxentius and he was none too pleased to be passed over for the rank of Caesar in favour of Constantius Chlorus. However, with Diocletian still in overall charge of the empire, Maxentius had no choice but to accept Diocletian's decision that the Augusti should choose their heirs from outside their family, as had been done by the 2nd-century emperors from Nerva through to Marcus Aurelius, whose reigns were a golden age of peace and stability.

Diocletian's plan was that after ruling for 20 years as Augustus, he and Maximian would voluntarily step aside, installing their Caesars, Galerius and Constantinus Chlorus, as the new Augusti, whereupon two new Caesars would be appointed who would in due turn ascend to the status of Augustus, and thus the cycle would be set up to continue.

Under the rule of the four, the empire stabilised and its string of military setbacks was reversed. Constantius reincorporated Britain back into the empire. Galerius defeated the Sasanian forces, forcing terms favourable to Rome on to the Persians. The tetrarchs were four tough and experienced military men who respected each other's abilities and, while imperial propaganda portrayed the tetrarchs as equal, in practice Diocletian remained primus inter pares.

As the 20 years Diocletian had planned on ruling drew to a close, the emperor could look with satisfaction upon an empire that had recovered its strength and prestige: government had been centralised - albeit at four different centres - to a degree never before seen, the imperial bureaucracy had been strengthened and its tax-raising powers raised considerably. The empire now had funds to pay for legions sufficient to defend its borders.

By all accounts weary after his labours, Diocletian went through with his plan to step down from government. Maximian, although less eager to abdicate, had no choice but to relinquish the purple, too. The two Augusti retired to substantial country palaces - the palace of Diocletian forms the centre of the Croatian city of Split and appeared in *Game of Thrones*, while the new Augusti, Constantinus Chlorus in the west and Galerius in the east, appointed two new Caesars: Flavius Valerius Severus became Caesar to Constantinus Chlorus and Maximinus (there are a confusing number of Maxs during the next decade) Caesar to Galerius.

So the first stage of Diocletian's plan to avoid the succession crises of the 3rd century had worked. But events, as they will, threw a spanner into the plans. On 25 July 306 CE, Constantius Chlorus died, just over a year into the second tetrarchy. He died in the far north of his province, in the city of York in Britannia, and his legions acclaimed as his successor his popular son, Constantine. Meanwhile, Galerius, following the plan, promoting Severus to Augustus. However, Maxentius, the overlooked son of the original tetrarch Maximian, raised an army to pursue his claim to the throne and, meeting Severus in battle, defeated him and later arranged his assassination. Just to make things really complicated, Maximian came out of retirement to declare himself Augustus again.

In an effort to sort out the mess, in 308 CE Galerian called a conference with Diocletian and Maximian (the original tetrarch). The solution - installing a new Augustus, Licinius, in the west with Constantine as his Caesar, while Galerius remained Augustus in the east with Maximinus as his Caesar - only made things worse. Maxentius retained power in Italy and Africa while Constantine was not at all happy to see Licinius promoted over his head.

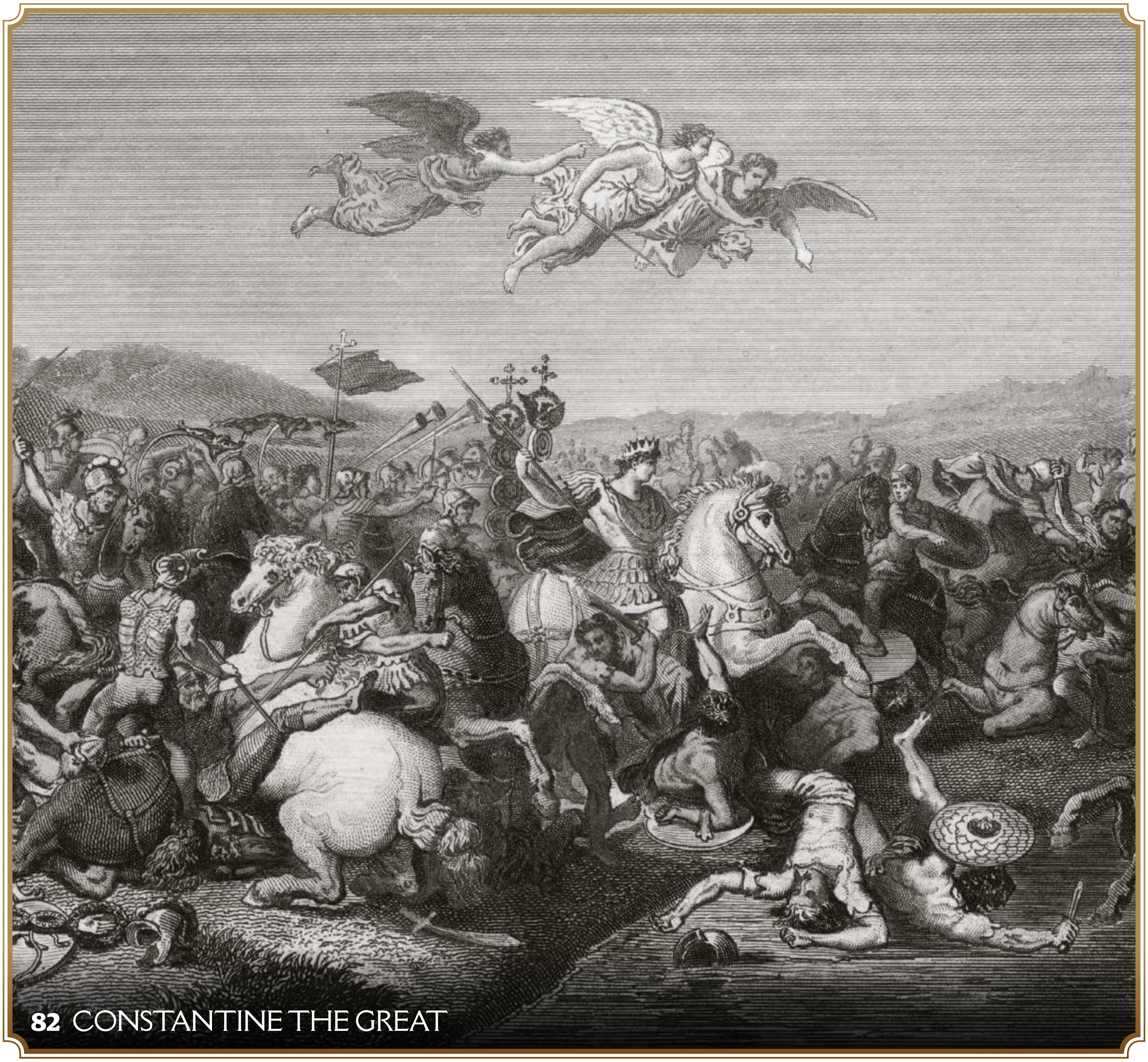
Faced with such a mess, there was only one way of resolving who held power: war. A messy series of civil wars between 309 and 313 CE gradually whittled down the number of claimants to the throne. Maximian, the original tetrarch, was invited to commit suicide by Constantine in 310 CE, while his son, Maxentius, was defeated by Constantine at the Battle of the Milvian Bridge in 312 CE. In the east, Galerius died from natural causes in 311 CE and Licinius defeated Maximinus in 313 CE, after which Maximinus committed suicide. So by 313 CE, there were two emperors left standing. The tetrarchy had returned to its original form of a diarchy, with Constantine the ruler of the western Roman Empire and Licinius in charge of the east. But the peace between Constantine and Licinius was uneasy; it did not take a particularly insightful observer to suspect that, in the end, the empire might only be big enough for one emperor.

The tetrarchs portrayed as completely united and, as a sign of this, all sculpted with the same face

© Getty, Coppermine Photo Gallery

4TH CENTURY

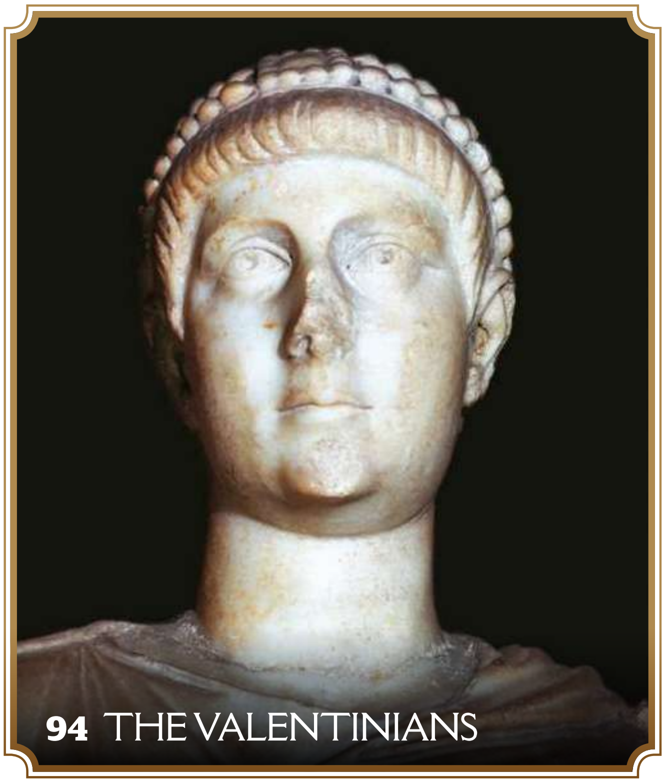
As the Roman Empire begins its switch to Christianity, meet the emperors who shunned the pagan religion



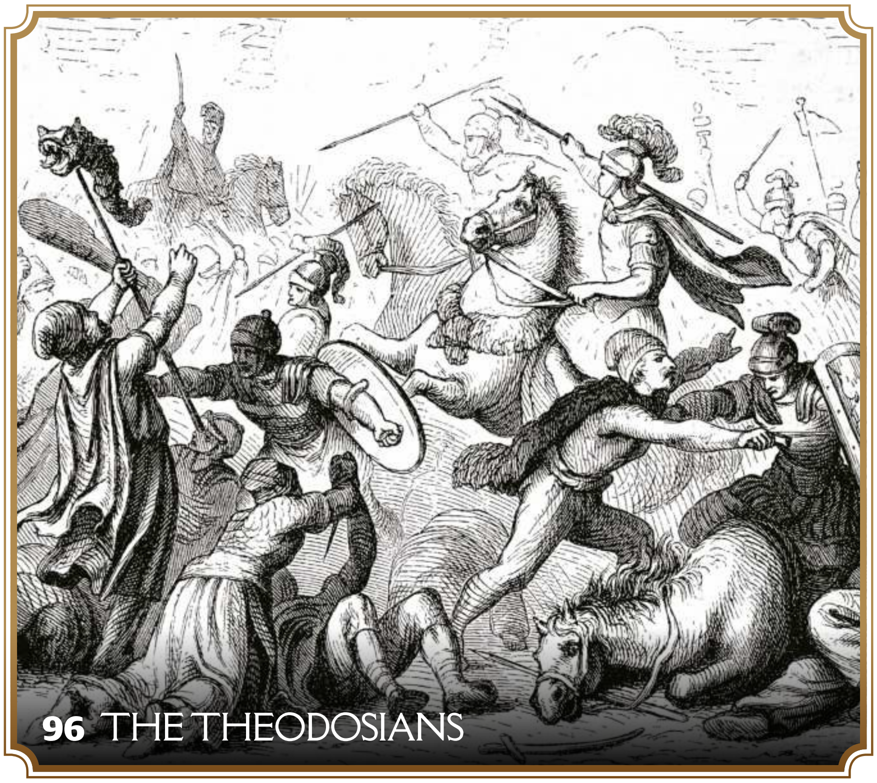
82 CONSTANTINE THE GREAT

LAVACRVM
RENASCEN
TIS VITAE
CLEMENS VII
PONT MAX
A LEONE X
COEPTVM

86 CONSTANTINE'S DYNASTY



94 THE VALENTINIANS



96 THE THEODOSIANS

306-337 CE

CONSTANTINE THE GREAT

Christians had been lion fodder for centuries, but under Constantine they clawed their way to acceptability

The young Roman emperor peered skywards towards the clouds, deep in prayer in an area of northern Rome between the Milvian Bridge and Saxa Rubra, a village on the ancient Via Flaminia. As the ruler of Britain and Gaul in an empire by now split into territories, Constantine had travelled a great distance to wage war against his brother-in-law Maxentius, who had seized control of central and southern Italy from Emperor Galerius to become the region's self-proclaimed imperial leader.

It was 27 October 312 CE and what Constantine saw that day as his armies prepared for battle gave him great confidence that he would defeat his rival, and it went on to change the entire course of religion in the empire. For according to Eusebius, one of the early historians of the Christian Church, while Constantine prayed at noon, a "marvellous sign appeared to him from heaven". It was, he said, the Chi-Rho (the combination of Greek X and P, the first two letters of the name of Christ) just above the Sun, bearing a Greek inscription that translated as "in this sign conquer".

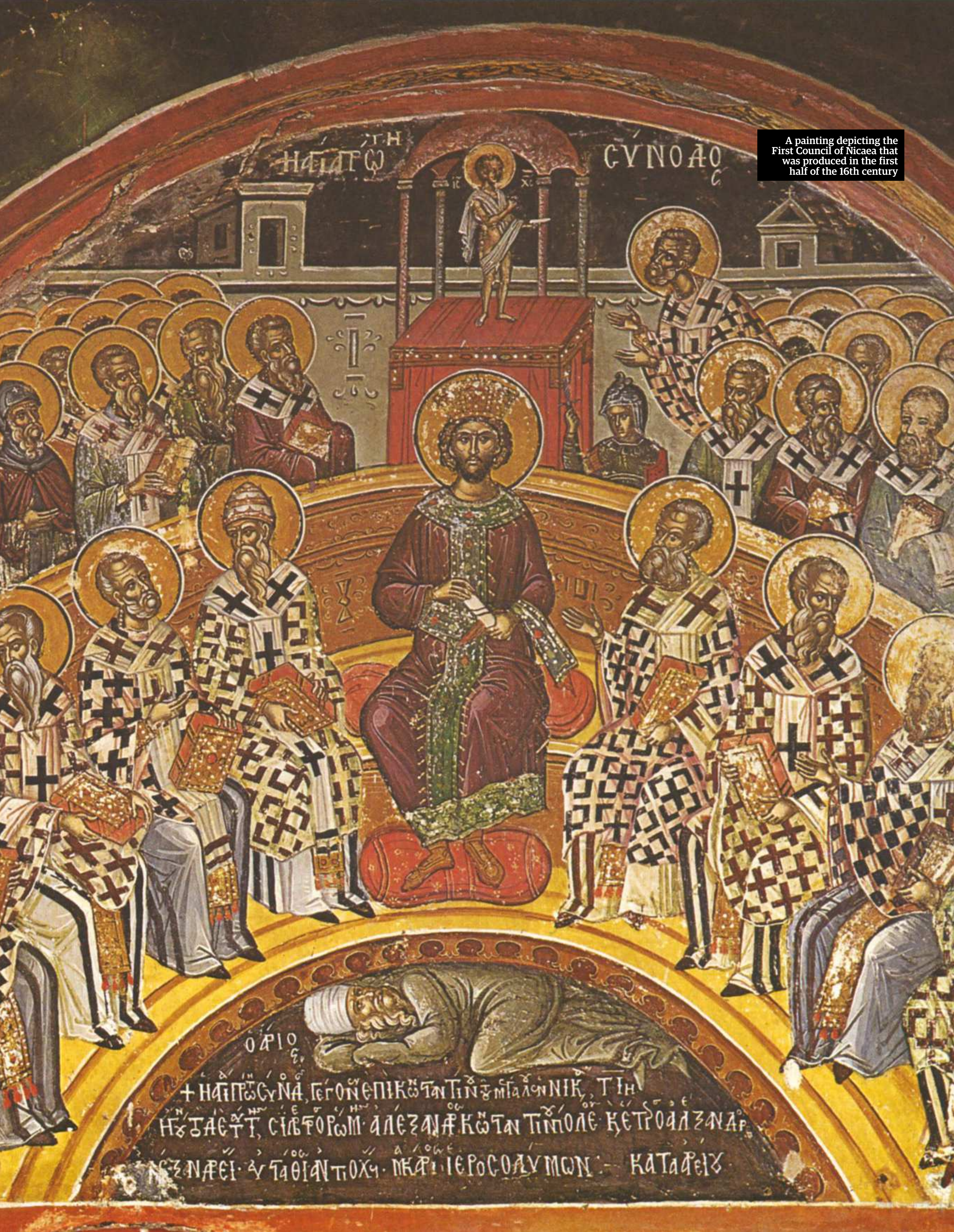
> "Constantine, until then a pagan monotheist, promptly turned years of Christian persecution on its head"

Constantine believed this to be a divine intervention, a hunch confirmed to him in a dream that night when he recalled Jesus Christ had willed him to use the cross in battle. He did, painting the first two letters of Christ's name in Greek on the soldier's shields. Little surprise, then, that when the opposing men were duly defeated by his army and Maxentius drowned in the River Tiber, Constantine was said to have attributed the victory to the Christian God - a moment that paved the way for a huge change in the way the empire viewed the fast-growing Christian religion. Constantine, until then a pagan monotheist, promptly turned years of Christian persecution on its head and began to fully support the movement.

Of course, this all sounds very fanciful, with many a historian casting doubt on such claims (some say Christianity was instilled in him by his mother, Helena, but this hasn't been verified either). Although a team of geologists in 2003 found evidence that pointed to a meteor appearing over central Italy in 312, perhaps explaining the light across the sky, an account just one year later makes no reference to the cross appearing from the heavens. The first time the dream and the scrawl on the shields appeared to make it into literature was at the hands of the Christian author Lactantius in 314 CE. But whatever the motivation, the outcome was the same: Constantine would come to believe he was the 13th apostle and he would go down in history as the first Christian emperor.

Rome had been infamously unkind to Christians. It had been the case from the very beginning: Jesus had been crucified in 33 CE despite great reluctance on the part of Judaea's governor Pontius Pilate. But when followers began to believe that Christ had risen, a distinct religious sect began to grow. Persecution of the Christians began when Rome suffered a ferocious fire in 64 CE, which burned for six days and destroyed one-third of the city. Emperor Nero sought to temper accusations that he had started it by pointing the finger at the Christians instead. He gathered up some of the followers and engulfed them in flames. Rome suddenly had an enemy within, Nero suggested, and widespread disapproval of them grew.

Christians would be executed in large numbers, usually for entertainment in the Colosseum and provincial arenas. Domitian, who ruled between 81 and 96 CE, made being Christian illegal, but it didn't appear to deter the religion's growth. On 7 March 203, Vibia Perpetua was among five Christians led into an arena in Carthage, North Africa. Wild beasts attacked them and Perpetua was wounded by a bull - a sword finishing her off. And yet it was seen as a victory for faith over death by the Christians who were unafraid of becoming martyrs and could show the Romans that persecution was pointless. Christians continued to be killed, though - Diocletian was tyrannical against them - but it only served to make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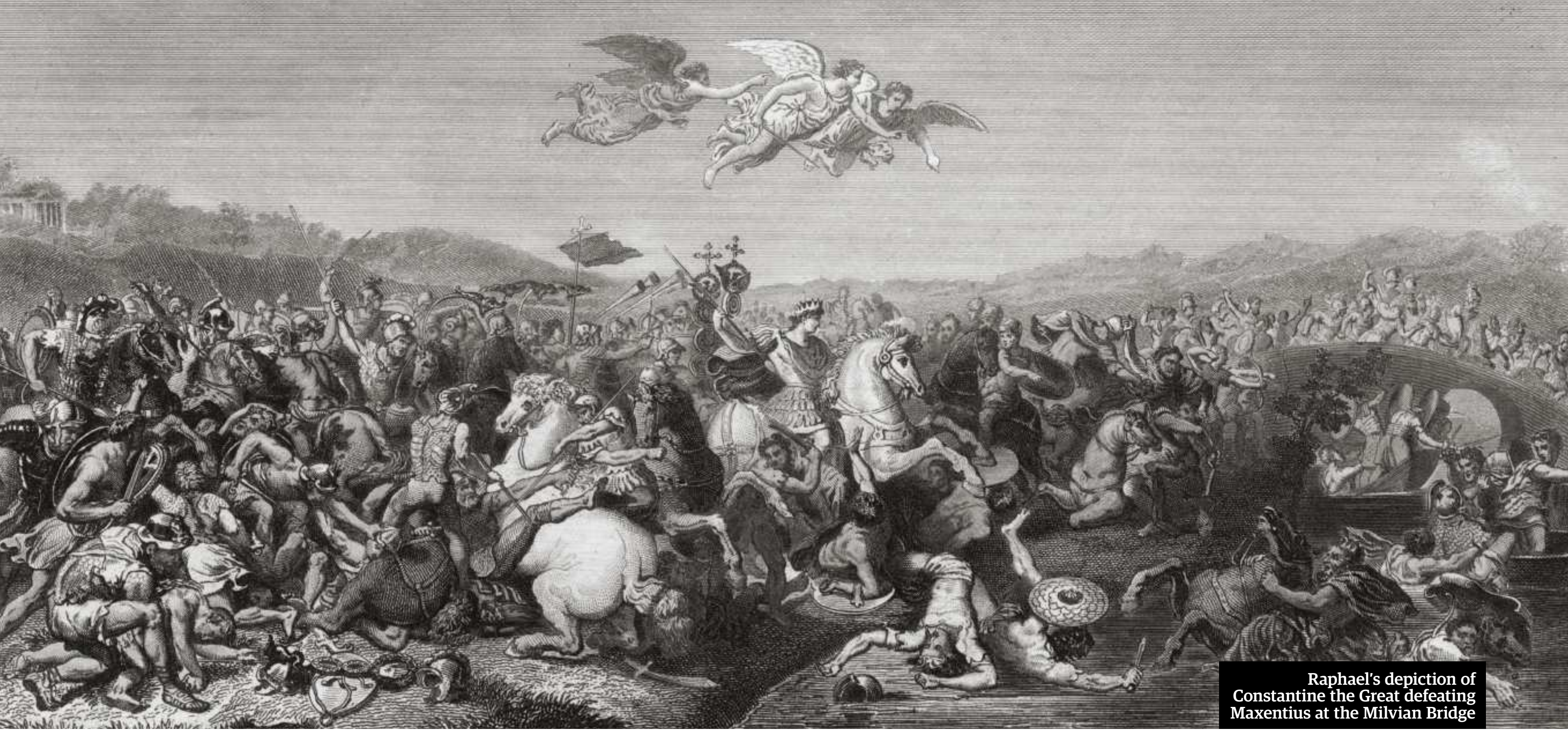
ΙΕΡΟΣΟΛΥΜΩΝ

A painting depicting the First Council of Nicaea that was produced in the first half of the 16th century


Raphael's depiction of Constantine the Great defeating Maxentius at the Milvian Bridge

the religion stronger. It was in this environment that Constantine came to rule from 306 CE. As a ruthless, commendable soldier who had risen through the empire's eastern ranks to become a military tribune under Diocletian and Galerius, he would have had first-hand experience of how the Romans treated the Christians. But, just as importantly, he would have seen how his father, Constantius, played no part in such persecutions.

Constantius had became the senior Western emperor to rule Britain and Gaul in 305 CE, and Constantine, born in the west of the empire, had returned to his roots to be with him shortly after. He barely got time to know his father, who died on 25 July 306 CE during a winter break in a battle against the Picts. But, on Constantius' deathbed recommendation, Constantine was promptly hailed Augustus by his troops. And while he was only accepted as Caesar of the west by Galerius, there was a sense of change in the air.

To many people's surprise, Galerius ended the Diocletianic Persecution of Christianity by issuing an edict of toleration in Serdica in 311 CE, despite being an opponent of the religion (although the growing threat to Rome's imperial authority made the move inevitable). This meant Christianity would be recognised and accepted by the empire, and it ended eight years of churches being destroyed, Holy Scriptures being burned, church property being investigated and privileges and rights being removed. But it was under Constantine that the greater strides were made.

In February 313 CE, he and Licinius, who controlled the Balkans, met in Milan and thrashed out an agreement that promised religious toleration for Christianity within the Roman Empire. "No one whatsoever should be denied the opportunity to give his heart to the observance of the Christian religion," it said. In recognition of the empire being predominantly non-Christian, it also proclaimed that people were free to worship any deity they wished, heralding what is widely seen as the touchstone of religious tolerance. For the first time, religions, whether Jewish, Christian, pagan or those that followed the traditional Roman gods, could all exist together.

But it was also the first time Christianity had been backed by the Roman Empire. It became institutionalised, with male bishops becoming government figures and women pushed into the background. At the same time, Christian property was returned and churches were permitted. But

Defining moment

Constantine sent east

293 CE

In order for Diocletian to foster loyalty among those who promoted to rule Rome's territories, sons - including Constantine - were sent eastward. There they resided in Diocletian's court where they were trained as fighters, taught both Latin and Greek, and became schooled in the ways of Rome so that, should the time come, they could be effective emperors too. Diocletian ruled a period of relative stability, but mainly because of the way he quashed those who threatened his power, among them Christians. It is generally thought that Constantine would have witnessed the relentless persecution of the Christians.

Defining moment

Trouble and strife

306 CE

When Constantine gave notice to Galerius that he was now the emperor, the eastern leadery refused to acknowledge the status and instead granted him the title of Caesar, handing the honour of Augustus to Severus. But Constantine still held great power, ruling over Britain, Gaul and Spain. When Maximian's son, Maxentius, rebelled in Rome, it was Severus who was sent to deal with the situation. But he hadn't reckoned on Maxentius offering his father co-rule, their joint force earning loyalty from the soldiers and securing victory over Severus. The following year, Severus was executed.

Constantine is born
Although the actual year is not certain, Constantine was born to a Roman army officer called Flavius Valerius Constantius and his consort, Helena, who today is revered as a saint.
February c.272 CE

Father becomes Caesar
Emperor Diocletian appointed two junior emperors, or Caesars: elevating Galerius in the East and allowing Maximian to promote Constantius in the West. It was part of a tetrarchy, or 'rule of four'.
293 CE

Father made emperor
When Diocletian retired, both Constantius and Galerius were promoted to Augustus of their territories. Constantine, overlooked as Caesar at the time, travelled to Britain to help his father on his campaign.
305 CE

Constantine proclaims himself emperor
When Constantius died in Eboracum, or modern-day York, the Tetrarchy began to unravel. Constantius had asked his soldiers to make Constantine his successor, and they did.
306 CE

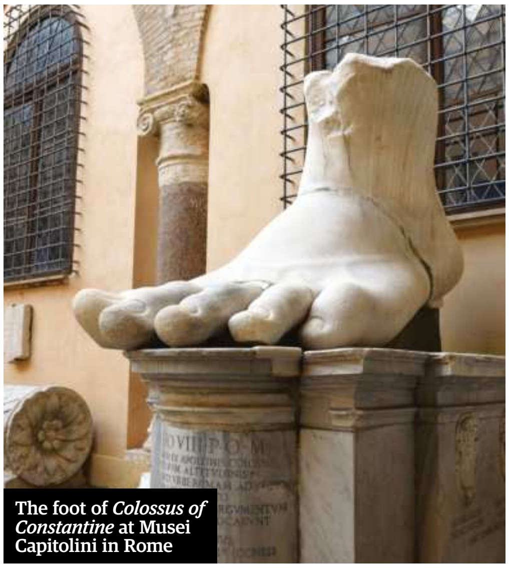
as well as restoring peace, stability and security, Constantine also turned Christianity into a fighting religion and troops fought under the symbol of the cross. On 18 September 324, Constantine battled Licinius at Chrysopolis and won, leaving him the sole emperor of Rome, thus ending the Tetrarchy that had cut the empire into four and had so caused the bitter divisions.

The victor felt a fresh start was needed and so he turned to the site of old Byzantium. There he sought to established a new capital, Constantinople - modern-day Istanbul in Turkey - which not only bore his name but grew, after his death, into the largest and wealthiest city in Europe. Thought to be easily defendable and holding a strategic position, it also became a Christian city. Not that Rome wasn't turned around, too; Constantine oversaw a massive religious building programme, ordering the construction of a basilica over the top of Ancient Rome's Circus of Nero between 318 and 322. It was completed in 360 CE, years after his death. Vatican City is situated in that spot today.

But even then, Constantine's Christian plans were not satiated and he went to great lengths to make the religion fully legalised across the empire. The First Council of Nicaea, a council of Christian bishops, was convened in 325 CE. This ratified the doctrine of the Trinity: the combination of the Jewish God as the Father, Jesus his son, and the Holy Spirit being the natural force. The full acceptance of Christianity didn't lead to entirely peaceful times - Christians ended up turning on each other amid controversy over the precise interpretation of the faith - but it allowed it to firmly establish itself without fear.

Despite overseeing so much religious change, Constantine himself was only baptised during his dying days, although that was quite common at the time. His conversion to Christianity came in 337 CE, shortly after Easter when he had fallen ill. Choosing the River Jordan because it was said to be where Christ himself had been baptised by John the Baptist, the Arianising bishop Eusebius of Nicomedia performed the ceremony, absolving the emperor of the many sins he felt he had accumulated. Constantine would die soon after on 22 May 337, aged 65, his legacy secure for the centuries to come.

> "It ended eight years of churches being destroyed, Holy Scriptures being burned, church property being investigated"



The foot of *Colossus of Constantine* at Musei Capitolini in Rome

Defining moment

Battle of Mardia

317 CE

Although Constantine and Licinius had worked together - the Edict of Milan having paved the way for Christian tolerance - any peace was not to last. Constantine had invaded the Balkan provinces ruled by Licinius the year before and now they were to battle again. It led Licinius agreeing Constantine was his superior in government and a peace which lasted for seven years. In the meantime, Licinius (in 320) had begun to oppress Christians again. In 324, civil war broke out. There were numerous battled culminating in Licinius being defeated in the Battle of Chrysopolis.

The Column of Constantine in Çemberlitaş was taken from the Temple of Apollo in Rome to Constantinople in 330 CE

BUILDING A NEW ROME

They say Rome wasn't built in a day, and neither, come to that, was the empire's new capital, which came to be built upon the Ancient Greek colony of Byzantium. Constantine had earmarked the site in 324 CE, noting that it stood between Europe and Asia, far closer to the eastern part of the empire than Rome and offering the chance of a fresh start for a new, combined land that was brought together under his rule.

The New Rome was built over six years and it was split into 14 regions, just like Rome had been. Consecrated in 330 CE, it was walled for defence and filled with art taken from Greek and Roman cities. There were new palaces and churches, and a ceremonial square - the Augustaion - was also laid, surrounded by porticoes. But, since Christians were not in favour of the bloody gladiatorial games that had taken place elsewhere, the amphitheatre found itself abandoned.

The city became known as Constantinople, in honour of the emperor, and it was seen as the gateway to Europe. It was also the centre for trade and, for a long time, the world's largest and richest city. But centuries later, as the Ottoman Empire grew all around it, Christian Europe would eventually fear its fall. The city, then one of the last bastions of the Roman Empire, finally succumbed to the Islamists in 1453 CE.

Continued unsettling rebellion
Licinius had been appointed Augustus in the West, but Maximian and Maxentius still caused problems for Constantine. Maximian committed suicide in 310, and the following year Maxentius fought Licinius.
310 CE

Battle of the Milvian Bridge
The rivalries having come to a head, Constantine and Maxentius - both brothers-in-law - fought a fierce battle. Maxentius was killed. The day before, Constantine had apparently received a message from Christ.
28 October 312 CE

Constantine backs Christianity
312 was said to have had a profound effect on Constantine and he ensured the persecution of the Christians was over with a declaration of religious tolerance.
313 CE

A United empire
Constantine became sole emperor. The Tetrarchy ended and he was free to push forward with his vision for the empire. He looked to move the capital from Rome to what became Constantinople.
324 CE

First Council of Nicaea
Constantine looked to establish the first ecumenical council of the Christian Church, and he laid many of the traditions that would become part and parcel of Christianity.
325 CE

Constantine baptised and dies
Constantine became a Christian himself in the last days of his life when he washed away his sins in a baptism at the River Jordan. He then died of illness on 22 May 337.
22 May 337 CE

© Getty Images

CONSTANTINE'S DYNASTY

As Constantine's sons found to their cost, being the children of one of Rome's great rulers could be tricky – or even fatal

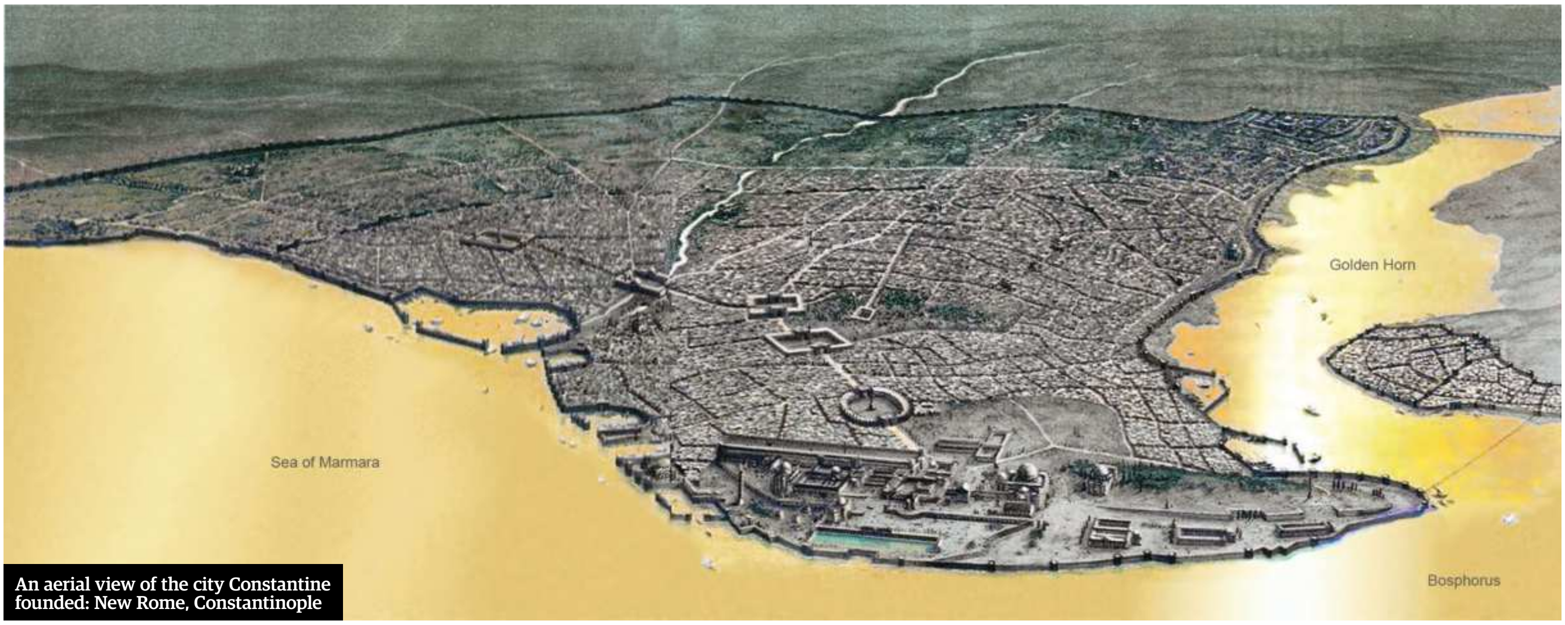
Written by Edoardo Albert

Being the son of the emperor was a privileged position: all the wealth and resources of the empire were devoted to the upbringing of the son of Caesar. But it could also be a risky, even fatal, relationship. So it proved for Constantine's eldest son, Flavius Julius Crispus. But it had not seemed it would end that way. For many years, Crispus was his father's trusted right-hand man, the Caesar to Constantine's Augustus, and thus the most likely successor to the rulership of the empire.

So great was Crispus' eventual downfall that we don't even know the year of his birth (sometime before 305 CE). We do know that his mother was Minervina, but whether she was Constantine's first wife or a concubine we again don't know. What we do know is that in 307 CE, Constantine had a new, political, wife: Fausta, the daughter of the Augustus Maximian, who had been one of the original tetrarchs alongside Diocletian. There is no official record of Constantine divorcing Minervina, which suggests that she was either a concubine or that by 307 CE Constantine was a widower. However, although Constantine had, in marrying Fausta, married the daughter of an emperor, he both acknowledged and adopted Crispus, his son by Minervina. In this Constantine followed the example of his own father, who had put aside Constantine's mother, Helena, for a political marriage but who had nevertheless accepted his son by Helena as his heir.

Constantine may have been influenced by the length of time it took Fausta to produce any children with him; while they were married in 307 CE, their first son, also called Constantine, was only born in 317. By then Crispus was already at least 12, and possibly quite a bit older. Fausta did at least then produce two more sons in rapid succession in Constantius and Constans, as well as three daughters. But, in the race to be imperial heir, Crispus had at least a decade headstart.

All the ancient records agree that Constantine was a good father to his eldest son and that Crispus was raised with all the advantages his birth could give, including being tutored by the leading scholars of the day. By contrast, Constantine's own education had been more piecemeal, and he always remained more comfortable speaking and reading Latin rather than Greek.



An aerial view of the city Constantine founded: New Rome, Constantinople

A colossal head of Constantine, now in the Capitoline Museum, Rome. Constantine liked his statues big

For his part, Crispus appears to have been a dutiful and able son, so much so that Constantine invested him Caesar on 1 March 317 CE (along with his half-brother Constantine, but as Fausta's first son was still a baby, this was an honorific rather than practical title). But Constantine was sufficiently confident of Crispus' abilities to give him military commands: his son bore out that confidence by winning a succession of victories against barbarian tribes. So when the uneasy co-existence between Constantine, Augustus of the West, and Licinius, Augustus of the East, came to an end in 324 CE, Constantine entrusted his eldest son with command of the fleet that won the decisive Battle of the Hellespont before helping his father to final victory at the Battle of Chrysopolis on 18 September 324 CE.

As his father's battle-tested and trusted right-hand man, the future of Cripus seemed assured: a decade older than his half-brothers, he had earned his father's confidence and the approbation of the people of Rome.

Less than two years later, Crispus was dead. Not long afterwards, the empress, Fausta, was dead too. Constantine had ordered the execution of his oldest son and his wife. Both of them were then subject to damnatio memoriae: all official portraits, records and memorials to Crispus and Fausta were painted over, burned and destroyed. They were expunged from history.

It wasn't supposed to have been that way. In 326 CE, Constantine had been emperor for 20 years - a notable achievement in itself. He had founded New Rome, Constantinople, in 324 CE but to celebrate two decades in power and the consolidation of the empire under his sole rule, Constantine decided to return to old Rome in 326 CE to mark his triumph. Sometime during that journey he learned intelligence concerning his son that was so damning that Crispus was hauled before a local court in what is today Croatia, condemned and executed. Within a couple of months Fausta was also sentenced to death and killed at her husband's command.

> "All official portraits, records and memorials to Crispus and Fausta were painted over and destroyed"

In Rome, Constantine refused to take part in pagan ritual sacrifices and was greeted coldly by the local aristocracy. It was a short visit and one that he would never repeat: from now on, Rome was to be left in splendid isolation, the titular font of the empire but an origin now far from genuine power.

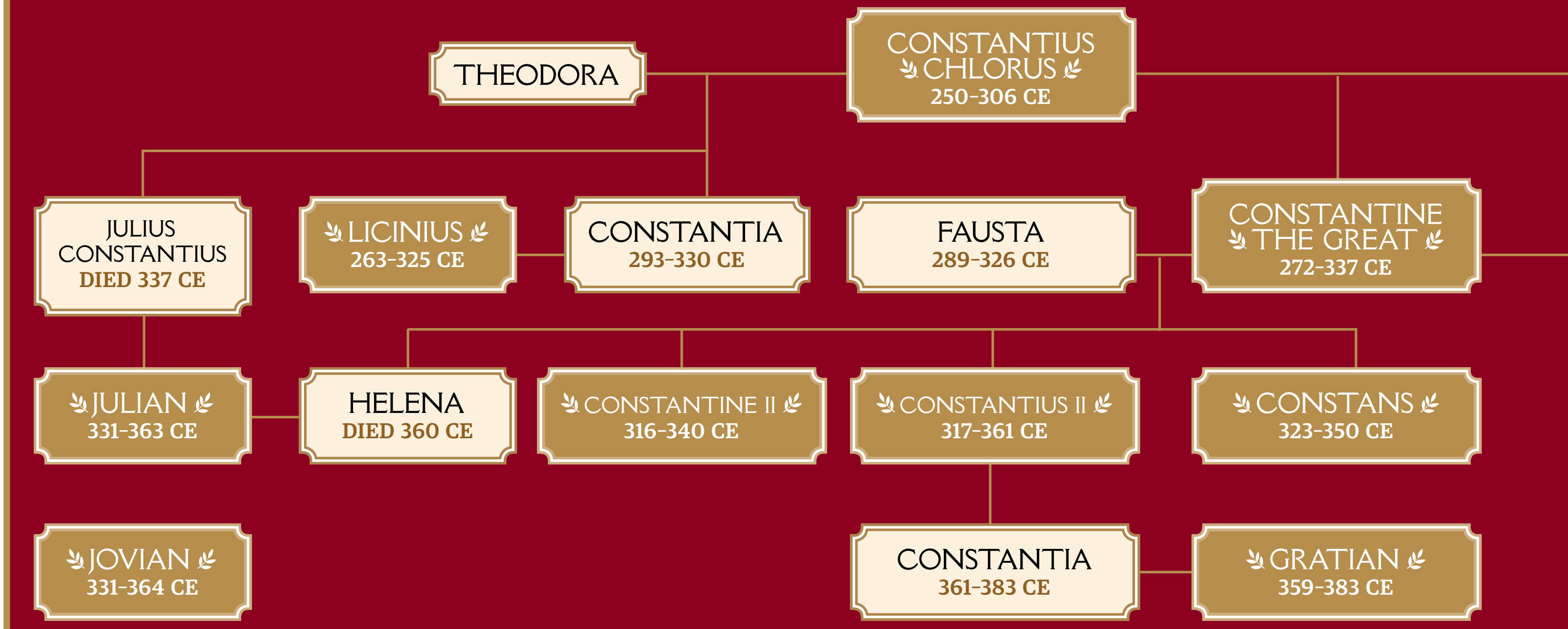
So successful was the expunging of Crispus and Fausta from official and unofficial records that no contemporary sources tell why the emperor's heir apparent and his wife were killed. The reason remains a mystery to this day, although there is general agreement that the deaths were linked in some fashion.

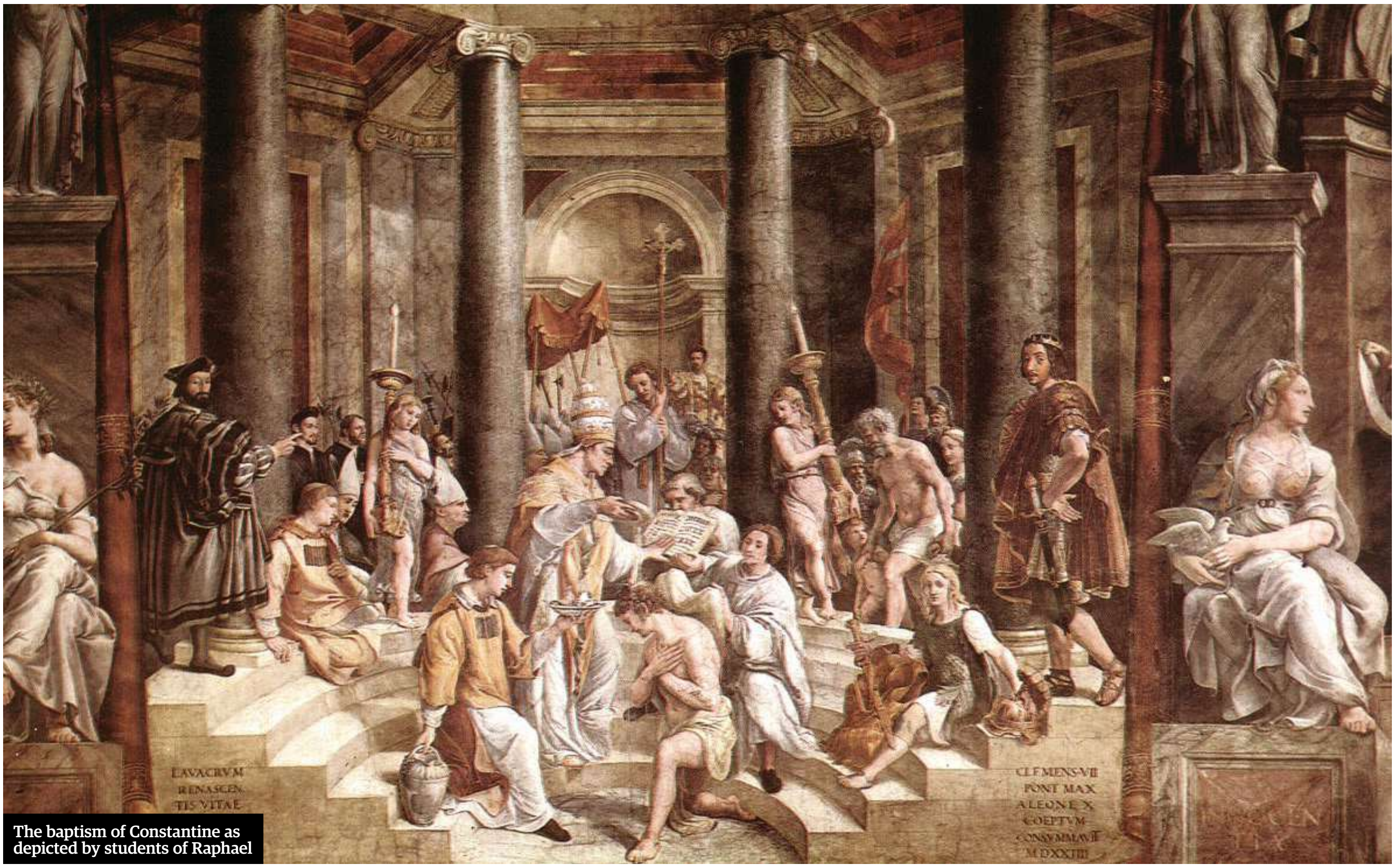
The most popular explanation, and the one advanced in various forms by ancient authors, is

Constantine II, Constantine's eldest son with his wife Fausta

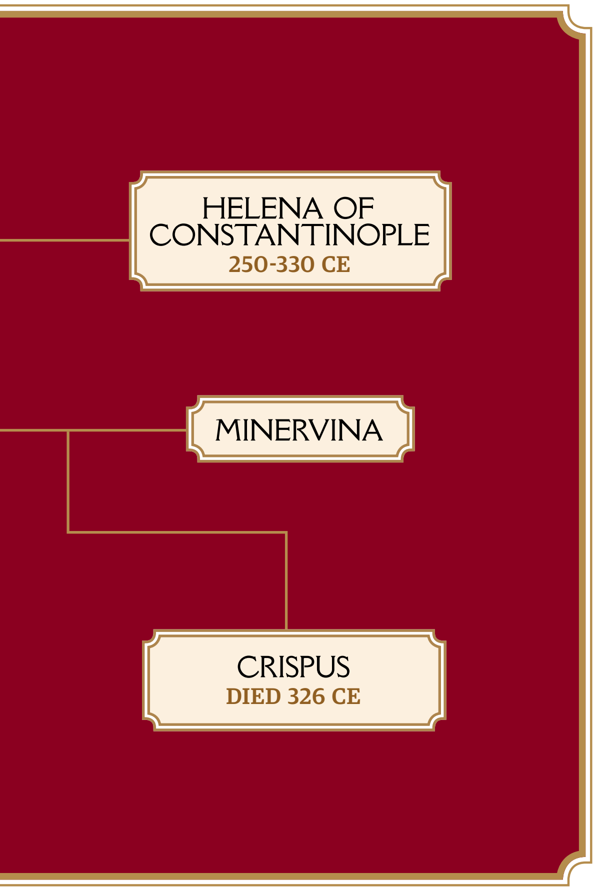
THE NEO-FLAVIAN DYNASTY

It's time to meet the sons of Constantine


THEODORA
CONSTANTIUS CHLORUS 250-306 CE
JULIUS CONSTANTIUS DIED 337 CE
LICINIUS 263-325 CE
CONSTANTIA 293-330 CE
FAUSTA 289-326 CE
CONSTANTINE THE GREAT 272-337 CE
JULIAN 331-363 CE
HELENA DIED 360 CE
CONSTANTINE II 316-340 CE
CONSTANTIUS II 317-361 CE
CONSTANS 323-350 CE
JOVIAN 331-364 CE
CONSTANTIA 361-383 CE
GRATIAN 359-383 CE



The baptism of Constantine as depicted by students of Raphael



HELENA OF CONSTANTINOPLE
250-330 CE

MINERVINA

CRISPUS
DIED 326 CE

that Fausta, wanting to ensure the accession of her own sons to the throne, accused her stepson, Crispus, of attempting to seduce or rape her. As Constantine's second wife, Fausta was nearer in age to Crispus than to her own husband. What's more, Fausta was the daughter of Maximian and the brother of Maxentius, both of whom died through the agency of her husband, Constantine. While ancient sources suggest Fausta had betrayed her father's machinations against Constantine to her husband, the empress had motive – lots of it.

In 320 CE Constantine had enacted a severe law against the crime of rape (so violent was the punishment that when the penalty was later changed to simple execution it was seen as a mercy). Bound by his own law, Constantine had no choice but to execute his eldest, and beloved, son, although the sentence itself was not carried out to its normal ferocity, for Crispus was executed by poison (or possibly hanging – the few existing sources disagree).

But when Constantine arrived in Rome at the end of what had proved to be a miserable journey, things only got worse, for he was met by his mother Helena with what appeared to Constantine incontrovertible evidence of his wife's complicity in the crime for which he had condemned his son. In April 326 CE Constantine had also stiffened the ancient penalties against adultery. But Fausta's part in the death of Crispus was not just adultery, it was treason, and for that torture was allowed in the case of credible accusation.

However, here too Constantine drew back from the full severity of his own laws when applied to his wife. Fausta was executed but, according to ancient authors, her death was merciful (at least by Roman standards): she was locked in a sauna that was then heated until she died from hyperthermia.

Traumatised by the tragedy that had torn the imperial family apart, Constantine's formidable mother went on a pilgrimage to the Holy Land, the first such pilgrimage by so eminent a person, where she found the remains of the tomb of Christ buried beneath the temple to Jupiter that the emperor Hadrian had built on Temple Mount in Jerusalem in his effort to extirpate for good and all the troublesomely fractious worship of the Jews and their Christian offshoot. In Palestine, Helena embarked on a massive programme of church building, as did Constantine, which begs the question, was this all an effort to expiate the blood guilt of the deaths of Crispus and Fausta? It's impossible to know for sure. Constantine himself never gave any public explanation for their deaths and his biographer, Eusebius, having eulogised Crispus in the first edition of his biography of Constantine, excised all mention of the emperor's eldest son from his second edition.

While the above scenario is a possible reading of the reason for the events that transpired, historians

azioni del Tempio di Gi

Grandiose Constantinian statuary extended to bronze depictions of the emperor: this one is also on display in the Capitoline Museum, Rome

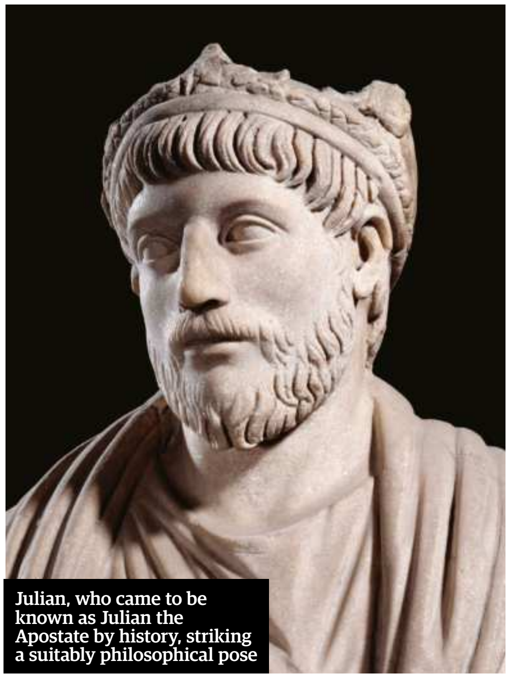
have asked why, if Constantine was indeed convinced that Crispus had been unjustly accused, the damnatio memoriae against him was never reversed. What is also notable is that Fausta's own sons, when they came to power after Constantine's death, never sought to rehabilitate their mother. So while she had, in some manner, ensured their own accession to the throne, they did not thank her publicly for her efforts.

The true reason why Constantine executed his son and wife was something the emperor took to his grave. Although a Christian, Constantine was not baptised until his final illness in 337 CE. By then he had reigned as Caesar then Augustus of the West and following that as ruler of the whole empire for nearly 31 years, the longest reign after that of Augustus himself. Baptism meant not just formal entry into the Church; it was the washing away of all the sins of Constantine's life. Of these none weighed so heavily as the executions.

On 22 May 337 CE Constantine died. It had been the most momentous reign of any emperor apart from Augustus. By founding Constantinople, Constantine had made manifest, in the splendour of the New Rome, the underlying cultural split of the empire into a Greek-speaking east and a Latin west. The founding of Constantinople meant that the Roman Empire, in its eastern iteration, would endure for 1,000 years after the fall of Rome, providing a vital bulwark against what seemed at one point the unstoppable advance of Arab armies.

Constantine also reformed the military, creating a mobile field army better suited to dealing with the many incursions the empire faced: it was during and after his reign that cavalry came to be the key wing of the Roman military, rather than the foot-slogging legionaries who had originally carved out the empire.

Through his conversion to Christianity and his promotion of Christians into key imperial positions, Constantine also fostered the growth of a specifically Christian, biblical culture among the empire's elite that ran parallel with their old Classical heritage. It was this dual culture that ensured the survival of much of that Classical heritage even after the empire that had fostered



Julian, who came to be known as Julian the Apostate by history, striking a suitably philosophical pose

Classical learning had fallen. An emperor's public role was to preserve Rome's sacred past, but Constantine went beyond that, for he created something genuinely new, a civilisation that combined the legacies of Athens, Rome and Jerusalem in an entirely new synthesis that would eventually change everything.

While Constantine's reforms would ultimately change the world, what he had not sorted out was the succession. With Crispus, his eldest son, dead, the succession passed to the sons of Fausta: Constantine (called Constantine II to distinguish him from his father), Constantius and Constans. Constantine had already appointed all his sons Caesars - junior rulers under his presiding Augustus - and following his death the empire was divided between them. But just to make things really complicated, there were also two nephews of Constantine, Dalmatius and Hannibalianus, who had also been raised to the rank of Caesar and given provinces to command.

This arrangement did not survive much past Constantine's death. The three sons of Constantine and Fausta were not about to have a couple of cousins share rulership of the empire with them. Dalmatius had only been raised to the rank of Caesar in September of 335 CE, with the provinces of Macedonia, Thracia and Achaea given into his control. His brother Hannibalianus had married Constantine's eldest daughter, Constantina, in the same year.

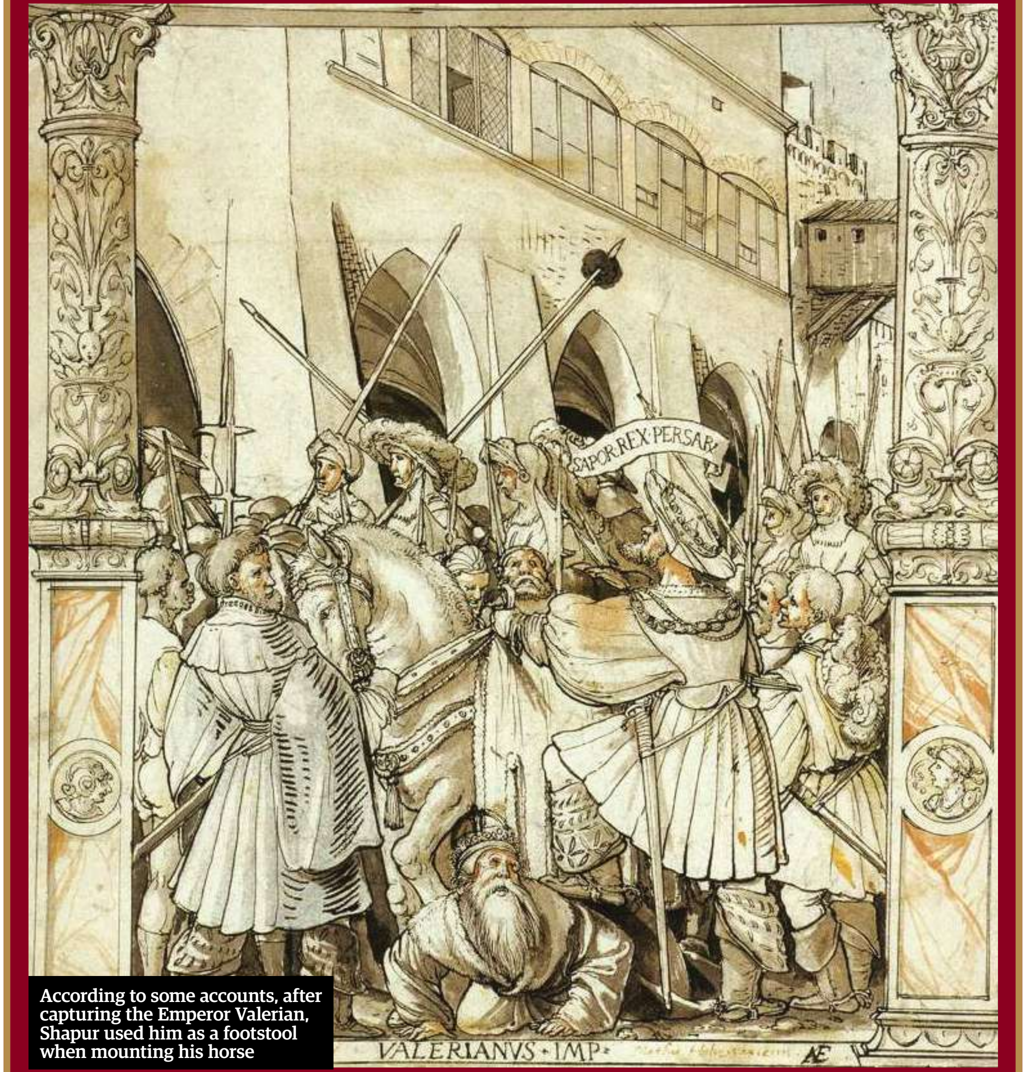
Being part of the imperial family in the period following the death of as commanding a figure as Constantine was a dangerous business. The sources are unclear as to exactly who was responsible for the purge that followed, but by the end of 337 CE, Dalmatius and Hanniabalianus were dead, along with four other cousins and two uncles of the imperial brothers. The sons of Fausta had cleared the field. Now they could divide the spoils.

Bust of Constantius II, the middle of Constantine's three sons, whose rule endured the longest

> "The three sons of Constantine were not about to have a couple of cousins share rulership of the empire with them"

ROME'S GREAT ENEMY

The Persian Sassanid Empire was Rome's only serious rival for centuries


SAPOR.REX.PERSAR.
VALERIANVS.IMP.

According to some accounts, after capturing the Emperor Valerian, Shapur used him as a footstool when mounting his horse

Persia has seen many empires over the centuries, from that of Cyrus the Great in 550 BCE to its final iteration as the Sassanid Empire between 224 and 651 CE. It was the latter that proved Rome's deadliest and most determined foe. During the many conflicts between the two empires, the Sassanids captured one emperor, Valerian in 260 CE, while two others died while campaigning against them, Carus in 283 CE and Julian in 363 CE. By contrast, none of the Sassanid emperors were killed in action against the Romans.

Following the fall of the Western Roman Empire, conflict continued between the Byzantine eastern Roman Empire and the Sassanids, with the conflict reaching a sapping climax during the bloody, protracted and ultimately inconclusive series of wars between 602 and 628. Fortunes swung backwards and forwards during this decades-long conflict, with the Sassanids even besieging Constantinople in 626, but at the war's end both powers were so exhausted, militarily and financially, that they fell victim to the sudden explosion of Arab armies out of Arabia riding under the banner of Islam. The Sassanid Empire was completely destroyed. The Byzantine Empire tottered and almost fell before recovering in later centuries, to endure for a further 800 years before finally falling to the Ottomans in 1453.

© Alamy, Getty Images

The three brothers met (it must have been a tense meeting with carefully set out rules to prevent treachery) and on 9 September 337 CE split the empire between themselves. Constantine II, the eldest, took Britain, Gaul and Spain. Constantius, the middle son and the one most heavily implicated in the purge of the imperial family following his father's death, had control of Constantinople and the eastern provinces of Thrace, Macedonia, Greece, Asia and Egypt. Constans, the youngest son, received Italy, Africa and Illyricum.

However, Constans was only about 15 at this time, so his eldest brother, Constantine II, remained his official guardian. This was not an arrangement calculated to produce stability between the two Augusti. Sure enough, Constantine II demanded more territory as his due as eldest son, which Constans ceded to him. However, tensions between the two brothers continued, with quarrels as to which bits of Africa they each controlled. It all came to a head when Constans reached maturity but his elder brother refused to relinquish the role of guardian. Constantine II assembled an army and invaded Italy but it all ended ignominiously, and fatally, for him when he was ambushed and killed by an advance party of Constans' men at Aquileia.

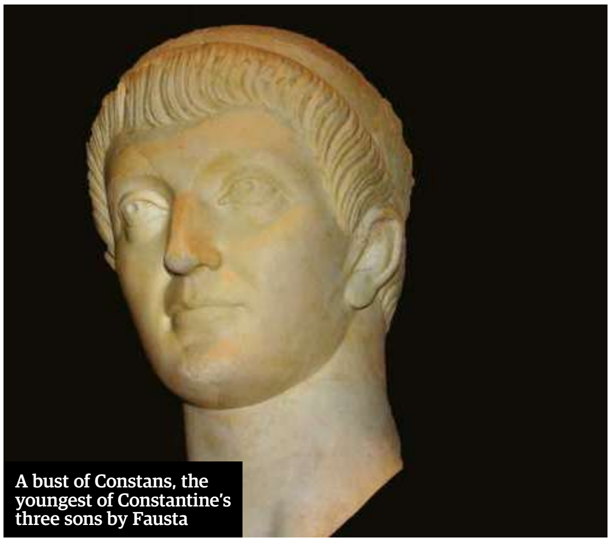
So by 340 CE the empire was once again split between an Augustus of the West, Constans, and an Augustus of the East, Constantius. Constans started well, defeating the Franks, and in 343 CE he became the last emperor to visit Britain. However, Constans lost the support of the army as a result of favouritism and rumours of homosexual dalliances with handsome barbarian hostages, leading to the rebellion of General Magnentius and the legions of the Rhine in 350 CE. Constans fled for his life but Magnentius caught up with him on the border of Gaul and Spain and killed him.

As the sole surviving son of Constantine, Constantius was not about to share the throne with a usurper such as Magnentius. The two rival emperors gathered their armies and, on 22 September 351 CE, met at the Battle of Mursa Major. It was a bloody day, with over 50,000 casualties. Magnentius fought in the thick of the fray but his army was routed, with the usurper only just escaping with his life. However, Magnentius was determined as well as brave. He withdrew to Italy, vowing to continue the fight. Constantius, after dealing with threats on the Danube frontier, finally pursued Magnentius into Italy in 353 CE and the two men and their armies fought again, this time on 3 July, at the Battle of Mons Seleucus. It was another bloody encounter, but again Constantius won the day although without killing his rival. However, deserted even by his own household troops, Magnentius realised that he was a beaten man and, rather than fall into Constantius' hands, he committed suicide in the fashion of a Roman soldier: he fell upon his sword.

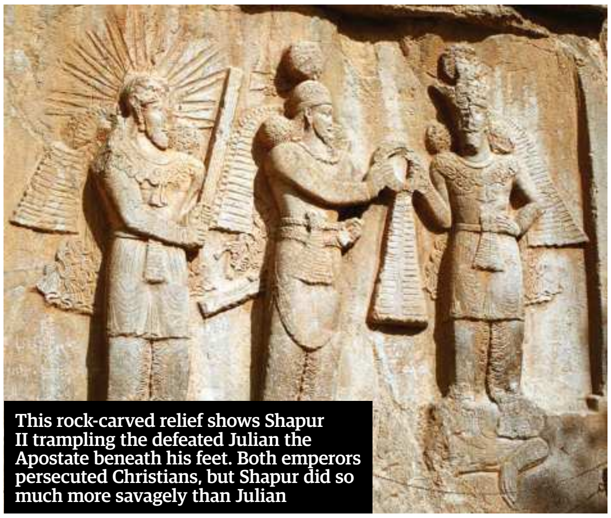
This left Constantius as the unchallenged ruler of the Roman Empire. He remained in sole charge

The man in the foreground shows just how big this statue of Constantine was originally

Shapur II, longest-reigning of the Sasanian emperors and nemesis of Julian the Apostate



A bust of Constans, the youngest of Constantine's three sons by Fausta



This rock-carved relief shows Shapur II trampling the defeated Julian the Apostate beneath his feet. Both emperors persecuted Christians, but Shapur did so much more savagely than Julian

"The rival emperors met at the Battle of Mursa Major. It was a bloody day, with over 50,000 casualties"

for two years but soon realised, as Diocletian had before him, that he needed help to run so vast an enterprise, particularly with the Sassanid Empire in Persia an aggressive and active foe and waves of barbarian invaders in the north. So, on 6 November 355 CE, Constantius made his last surviving male relative, Julian, Caesar and sent him off to Gaul.

Julian was the son of Constantine's half-brother, Julius Constantius (they were both sons of Constantinus Chlorus but had different mothers). While raised as a Christian, as a young man he rejected the new religion in favour of a synthesis of ancient Roman pagan beliefs and philosophical neo-Platonism: his imperial heroes were Hadrian and Marcus Aurelius. As Caesar of Gaul, Julian led successful campaigns against Germanic tribes, gaining popularity among his troops and prestige with the wider populace. Meanwhile, in the east, Constantius was embroiled in an ongoing series of actions against the Sasanian emperor, Shapur II. To reinforce his forces for war against Shapur, Constantius ordered half of Julian's legions to come east. In response, the western legions – which had mainly been recruited from German barbarians – decided to ignore their summons and revolt, proclaiming Julian as Augustus.

Faced with the ongoing threat of Shapur II, Constantius could do little but send reproving letters to Julian. However, by 361 CE Constantius clearly felt he had no choice but to march west to face his cousin in battle. However, Constantius fell ill on the way and, having been baptised, he died on 3 November 361 CE. Before his death Constantius altered his will to recognise his cousin Julian as his legitimate heir and the ruler of the Roman Empire.

For the born-again pagan Julian, this was clearly the result of the gods' favour. Now emperor, Julian attempted the restoration of the old gods and pagan sacrificial rituals. But not content with the old, amorphous paganism, Julian attempted to impose a sort of pagan orthodoxy on these restored priests as well as calling them to the sort of moral life that was expected of Christian priests but that had never been a requirement for the officiators at pagan rituals, for whom the rank was a badge of status rather than a call to a devout and serious life. After initially promising toleration of all religions, Julian moved quickly towards suppressing Christianity, dismissing Christians from senior positions in the army.

While secure in the west, Julian needed a victory to cement his position in the east. To that end, Rome's perennial enemy, the Persians, provided a worthy obstacle. Julian's campaign against the Sasanians proved disastrous. Despite assembling the largest Roman army ever to invade Persia and reaching the Persian capital, the Persians made skilful use of the desert territory and Julian's lack of a clear-cut strategic objective to force the Romans to retreat. It was during this retreat that Julian was wounded by a spear, an injury that claimed him the next day. There would be no further pagan emperors. Although Julian's last words are apocryphal, they express the truth of his short reign: "You have won, Galilean."

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GRATIANUS THE ELDER

Dates unknown

VALENS

c.328-378 Reigned: 364-378

Ruling the Eastern Roman Empire while his brother governed the West, spent much of his reign at war or putting down uprisings. However, it was on the battlefield that he would take his last breath as he was killed at the Battle of Adrianopole in August 378.

MARINA SEVERA

Unknown - c.375

First wife of Valentinian I.

VALENTINIAN I

c.321-375 Reigned: 364-375

Proclaimed emperor at Nicaea, Valentinian took charge of the Western Roman Empire and made a point of fortifying the border along the Rhine. His reign was largely successful, and he even managed to leave an heir, his young son Gratian, who he appointed co-emperor in 367 when the boy was just eight years old.

JUSTINA

c.340-388

Second wife of Valentinian I.

DN GRATIANUS P F AUG

VALENTINIAN II

c.371-392 Reigned: 375-392

With the death of Valentinian I in 375, his very young second son was proclaimed emperor by the army. But there was already an emperor: Gratian, his half-brother. He reluctantly accepted to co-rule, and growing up as a leader of the Roman Empire, Valentinian II became influenced by his court and his mother. However, when Magnus Maximus rose up in 383, he managed to keep control of Italy for a few years, before Maximus tried to invade in 387. However, the usurper was defeated and Valentinian's rule continued.

GRATIAN

c.359-383 Reigned: 367-383

Although he had been ruling since he was just a boy, Gratian became sole emperor of the Western Roman Empire when his father died in 375. Gratian continued the trend of Roman emperors, rejecting the title of Pontifex Maximus, and instead embracing Christianity, but he was overthrown by Magnus Maximus in 383 and killed fleeing over the Alps in August of that year.

DN CONSTANTIUS P F AUG

CONSTANTIUS III

c.358-421 Reigned: 421

With a reign of just seven months, it was hard for Constantius to make much of an impact on the Western Roman Empire, but some historians have suggested that he could have changed its fate with his ability to keep barbarians at bay. He died in September 421 from pleurisy.

GALLA PLACIDIA

c.390-450

DN PLA VALENTINIANUS P F AUG

VALENTINIAN III

c.419-455 Reigned: 425-455

Emperor of the West, Valentinian would see himself assassinated in Rome after 30 years in charge. It was during his reign that the Huns under the command of Attila would invade in the 450s.

LICINIA EUDOXIA

c.422-462

PLACIDIA

Unknown - c.484

OLYBRIUS

Unknown - 472 Reigned: 472

Ruling the West for under a year, Olybrius's premiership wasn't recognised by his colleague in the East, Leo I.

While Valentinian II died when he was only 21, he had reigned the Roman Empire for around 17 years

THE VALENTINIAN DYNASTY

Intermingled with the Theodosians, the Valentinians were sure to leave their mark on the Roman Empire in one way or another

GALLA
c.370-394
Second wife of Theodosius I.

THEODOSIUS I
c.347-395 Reigned: 392-395
See page 98.

AELIA FLACCILLA
c.356-386
First wife of Theodosius I.

EUDOXIA
Unknown - 404

ARCADIUS
c.377-408 Reigned: 383-395
See page 98.

HONORIUS
c.384-423 Reigned: 393-423
See page 98.

EUDOCIA
c.401-460

THEODOSIUS II
c.401-450 Reigned: 402-450
See page 98.

PULCHERIA
c.398-453
Known for her piety and chastity, Pulcheria served as regent for her younger brother, Theodosius II. She later married the future emperor, Marcian, but it was for her Christian faith that she would be remembered, as she built many cathedrals in Constantinople and made sure that her possessions would be donated to the poor after her death.

MARCIAN
c.392-457 Reigned: 450-457
See page 98.

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THE THEODOSIANS

Meet the last imperial family of the whole empire

Written by Edoardo Albert

The empire was in trouble. Serious trouble. On 9 August 378 CE, the Augustus of the east, Emperor Valens, had led his troops into battle against an army of Goths near the city of Adrianople. Expecting to achieve an easy victory over the barbarians, some Roman soldiers attacked precipitately while negotiations were still continuing between Valens and the barbarian king. With Roman discipline and coordination beginning to dissolve, the Goths delivered a final, fatal blow when their cavalry, which had been away from camp foraging through the countryside, returned and surrounded the extended and disorganised Roman forces.

The Roman army, the key imperial military force in the east, was utterly routed. Emperor Valens himself was killed in the chaos, dying an anonymous death among the thousands of legionaries who died that day. It was a humiliation from which the empire never really recovered - indeed, some historians trace the fall of the Western Empire to this catastrophic defeat. In the chaos that followed, the surviving emperor, Gratian, Augustus of the west, needed an experienced general to take over in the east and bring some stability to the situation. In desperate straits, Gratian sent messengers to a general living quietly in Spain. His name was Theodosius and his father, Theodosius the Elder, had played the key role in the defeat of what the Romans called the Great Conspiracy, when the Picts, Saxons and the Gaels launched a coordinated attack on Britain in 368 CE. His son, Theodosius, had been a key instrument in that campaign before distinguishing himself in further campaigns against the barbarians. But in 376 CE, Theodosius the Elder, despite an unblemished military record and a history of loyalty to the emperor, was fatally caught up in imperial politics and executed. Fearing for his own life and that of his family, the son had withdrawn to family estates in Spain, far from the snake pits of the emperor's courts.

The invitation to take command of the East was, effectively, a promise of the imperial purple, and Theodosius accepted the offer. He was faced with the question of what to do about the Goths. Large numbers of them had settled within the empire in the Balkans, and Theodosius soon recognised that it was impractical and probably impossible to expel them. What he needed to do was co-opt those who were amenable to accepting Rome as their overlord, while isolating and destroying those who were set on carving out independent kingdoms within the empire. Theodosius set about this with considerable guile and skill, inviting the paramount Gothic chieftain, Athanaric, to Constantinople, where the emperor proceeded to dazzle the barbarian with the wealth, opulence and magnificence of what was the greatest city on Earth. Athanaric was so enthralled with what was presented that he agreed to Theodosius' offer of alliance, with the Goths answering to Athanaric serving the imperial standard. And even though Athanaric died soon afterwards, his chieftains were so impressed with the splendour of the funeral that Theodosius laid on for Athanaric that they kept to the treaty. Meanwhile, Theodosius, through careful intelligence and skilful campaigning, slowly destroyed the Gothic chieftains unwilling to agree to his terms.

The final treaty, which was signed on 3 October 382 CE, enabled the Goths to settle in Thrace, south of the Danube frontier, and to fight in the Roman army as a

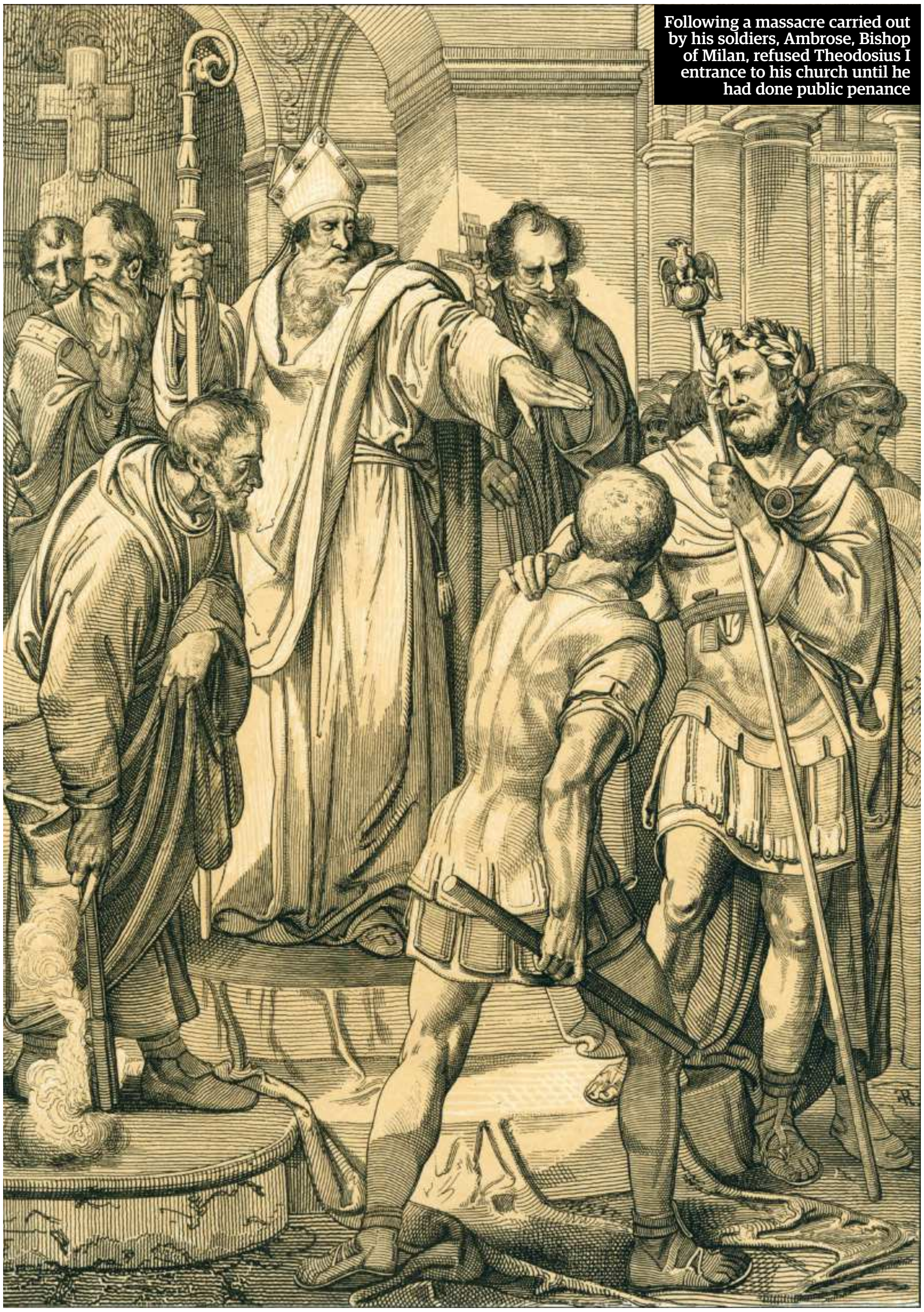
> "Theodosius slowly destroyed the Gothic chieftains unwilling to agree to his terms"

The sarcophagus of Stilicho, the general whom some call the last of the Romans

A bust of Emperor Theodosius II, whose reign was long in part because he wielded almost no power himself national contingent. Theodosius had managed to quell the immediate crisis.

But of course, such was the sea of troubles afflicting the empire at the end of the 4th century that no sooner had one crisis been resolved than another one flared up. In 383 CE, there was rebellion in the west, where the usurper Magnus Maximus had killed the Western Augustus, Gratian, and installed himself in his place. It was five years before Theodosius was sufficiently confident of the security of the eastern border – he signed a peace treaty with the aggressive Sasanian Empire to ensure stability against the empire's most formidable foe – to move against Magnus Maximus. The emperor and the usurper met at the Battle of the Save in yet another conflict that bled the empire of its manpower in civil strife.

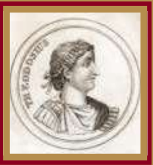
Theodosius won: the usurper never ascended to imperial legitimacy through victory but fell to ignominious execution. Theodosius was now de facto ruler of the whole empire: he would be the last emperor of both the Western and Eastern Empires. Having celebrated a triumph in Rome on 13 June 389 CE, and having stayed for two years



Following a massacre carried out by his soldiers, Ambrose, Bishop of Milan, refused Theodosius I entrance to his church until he had done public penance

THE THEODOSIANS

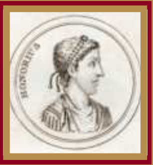
The family that split the empire



THEODOSIUS I

Dates ruled: 379-395
Area ruled: Last emperor to rule East and West

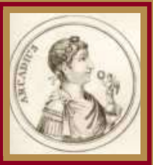
Theodosius stabilised the Eastern Empire, then ruled it all for the final years of his reign. But Theodosius neglected to provide heirs up the roles given them.



HONORIUS

Dates ruled: 395-423
Area ruled: Western Roman Empire

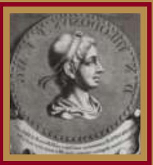
As emperor, Honorius proved entirely inadequate to the challenges facing the Empire, his only talent being personal survival, his chief failing an unerring ability to consistently listen to bad counsel.



ARCADIUS

Dates ruled: 395-408
Area ruled: Eastern Roman Empire

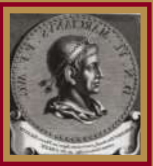
The elder brother to Honorius, Arcadius was as ineffectual as his sibling but without the latter's preternatural talent for somehow surviving personal incompetence.



THEODOSIUS II

Dates ruled: 408-450
Area ruled: Eastern Roman Empire

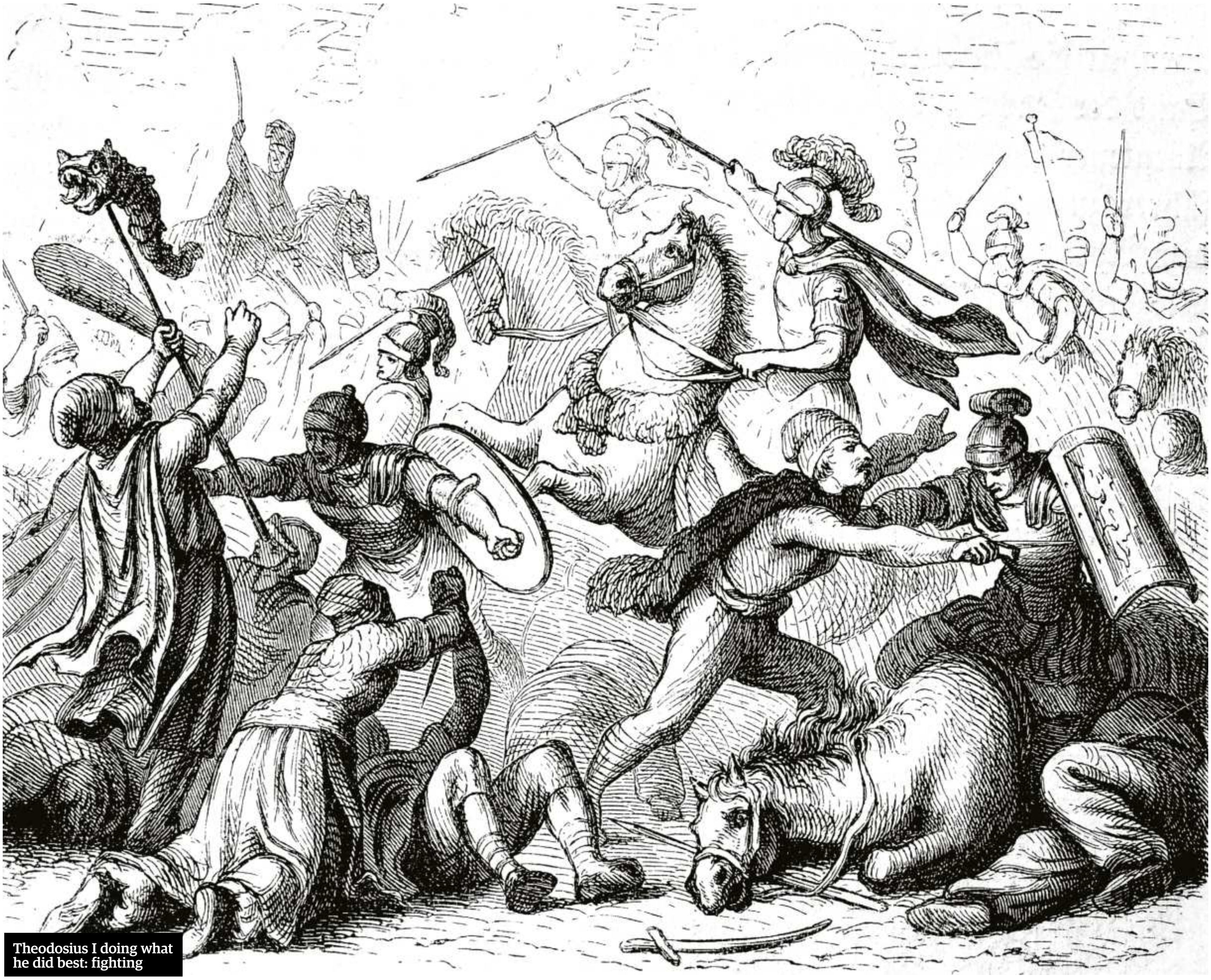
The son of Arcadius, Theodosius would have been better suited to life as a scholar. He left running the Empire to ministers and relatives, notably his sister, Pulcheria.



MARCIAN

Dates ruled: 450-457
Area ruled: Eastern Roman Empire

A Theodosian by virtue of marriage to Pulcheria, the sister of Theodosius II, Marcian was an able administrator who managed to keep the Eastern out of the chaos engulfing the Western Empire.



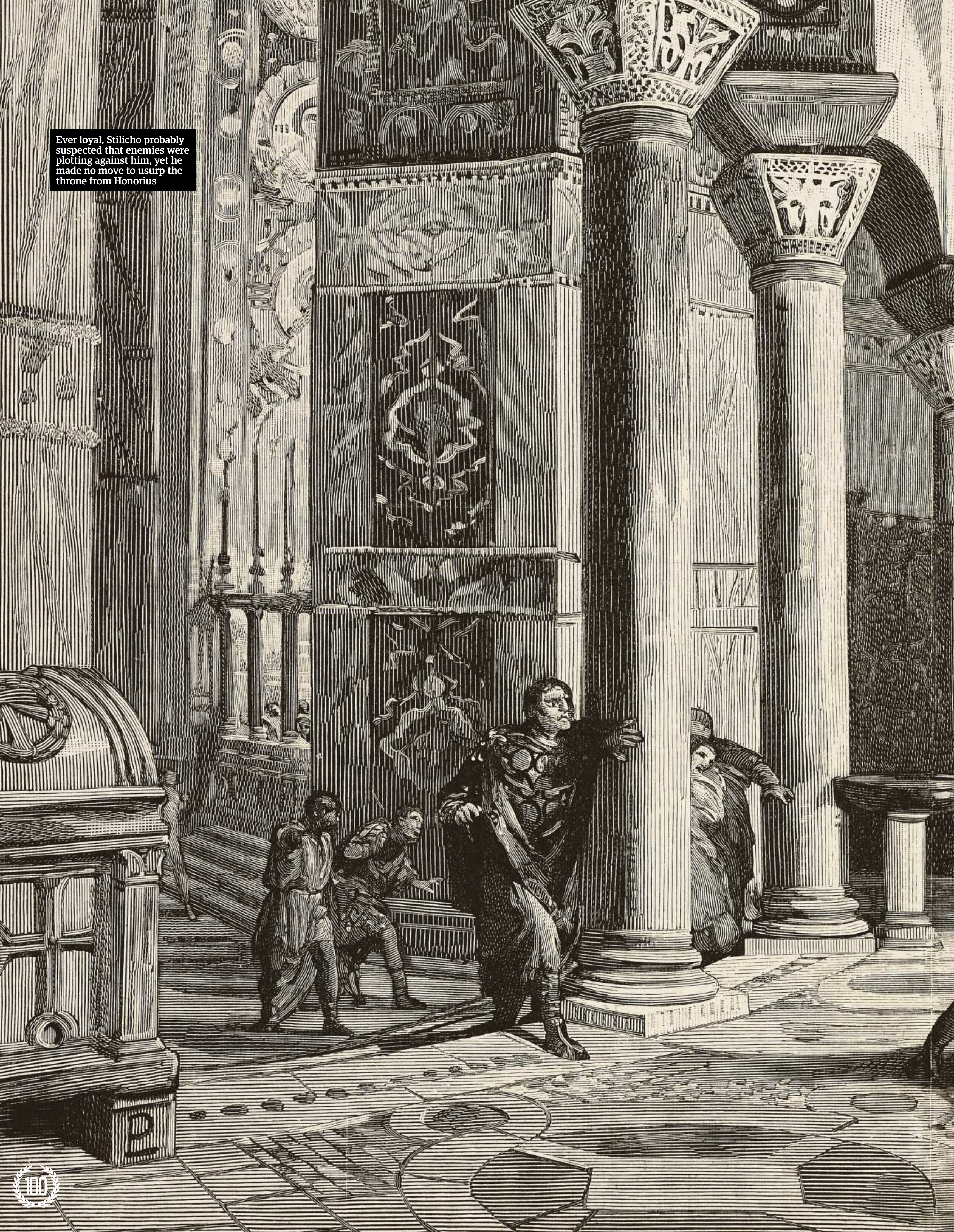
Theodosius I doing what he did best: fighting

> "Both boys proved entirely inadequate to the demands placed upon them: indeed the two young emperors only contributed to the stench of decay that had settled upon Rome"

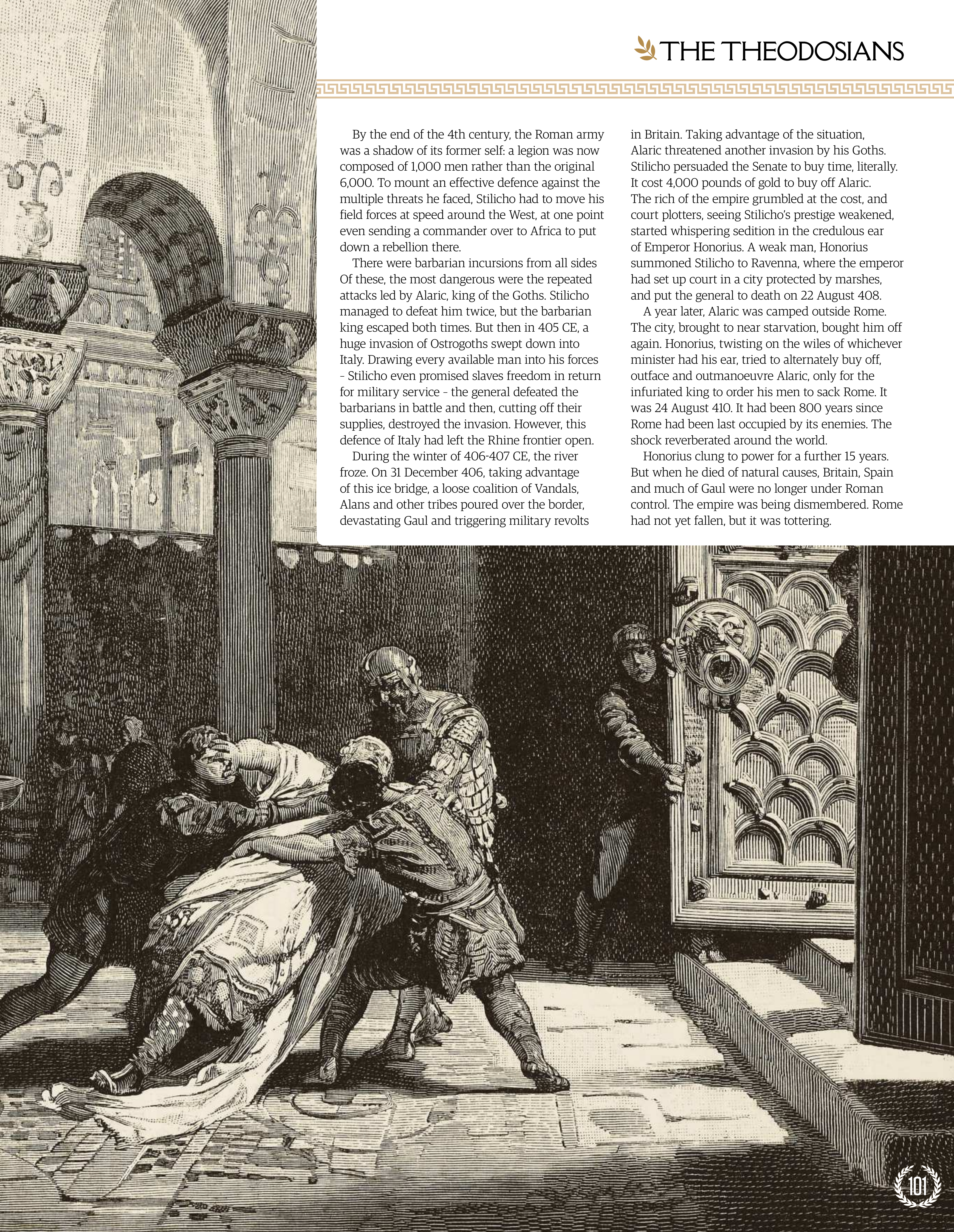
in Milan where he installed a puppet Augustus of the West, Theodosius returned to Constantinople in November 391 CE.

But in the emperor's absence, another usurper attempted to take the title of Augustus of the West. The empire was set for another bout of civil strife. Again, Theodosius took time assembling his forces. Among the commanders of his army was a barbarian named Stilicho, the son of a Vandal, who had risen through service in the Roman armies until he had attained such eminence that Theodosius had married his own niece to him. The battle, when it came on 5 September 394 CE, was initially disastrous for Theodosius and Stilicho but they rallied their men and renewed the assault on the following day, breaking the enemy's forces and killing the usurper. Not long after this victory, Theodosius fell ill. The ailing emperor was taken to Milan where he died on 17 January 395 CE. He was 48. As heirs, he appointed his two sons, Arcadius, 18 years old and designated Augustus of the East, and Honorius, ten years old and the Augustus of the West. Unfortunately, both boys proved entirely inadequate to the demands placed upon them by an empire beset by enemies from without and dissension and decadence within: indeed, the two young emperors only contributed to the overwhelming stench of decay that had settled upon the rotting corpse of Rome.

While his sons proved incompetent, Theodosius nonetheless possessed the foresight to appoint his most competent general, Stilicho, as guardian to Honorius. While the Augustus of the West was still a minor, Stilicho assumed the rank of magister militum, or master of soldiers, and, to safeguard his position, he married his daughter to Honorius. He then set about defending the empire from its myriad enemies, external and internal, with extraordinary vigour.



Ever loyal, Stilicho probably suspected that enemies were plotting against him, yet he made no move to usurp the throne from Honorius



By the end of the 4th century, the Roman army was a shadow of its former self: a legion was now composed of 1,000 men rather than the original 6,000. To mount an effective defence against the multiple threats he faced, Stilicho had to move his field forces at speed around the West, at one point even sending a commander over to Africa to put down a rebellion there.

There were barbarian incursions from all sides Of these, the most dangerous were the repeated attacks led by Alaric, king of the Goths. Stilicho managed to defeat him twice, but the barbarian king escaped both times. But then in 405 CE, a huge invasion of Ostrogoths swept down into Italy. Drawing every available man into his forces – Stilicho even promised slaves freedom in return for military service – the general defeated the barbarians in battle and then, cutting off their supplies, destroyed the invasion. However, this defence of Italy had left the Rhine frontier open.

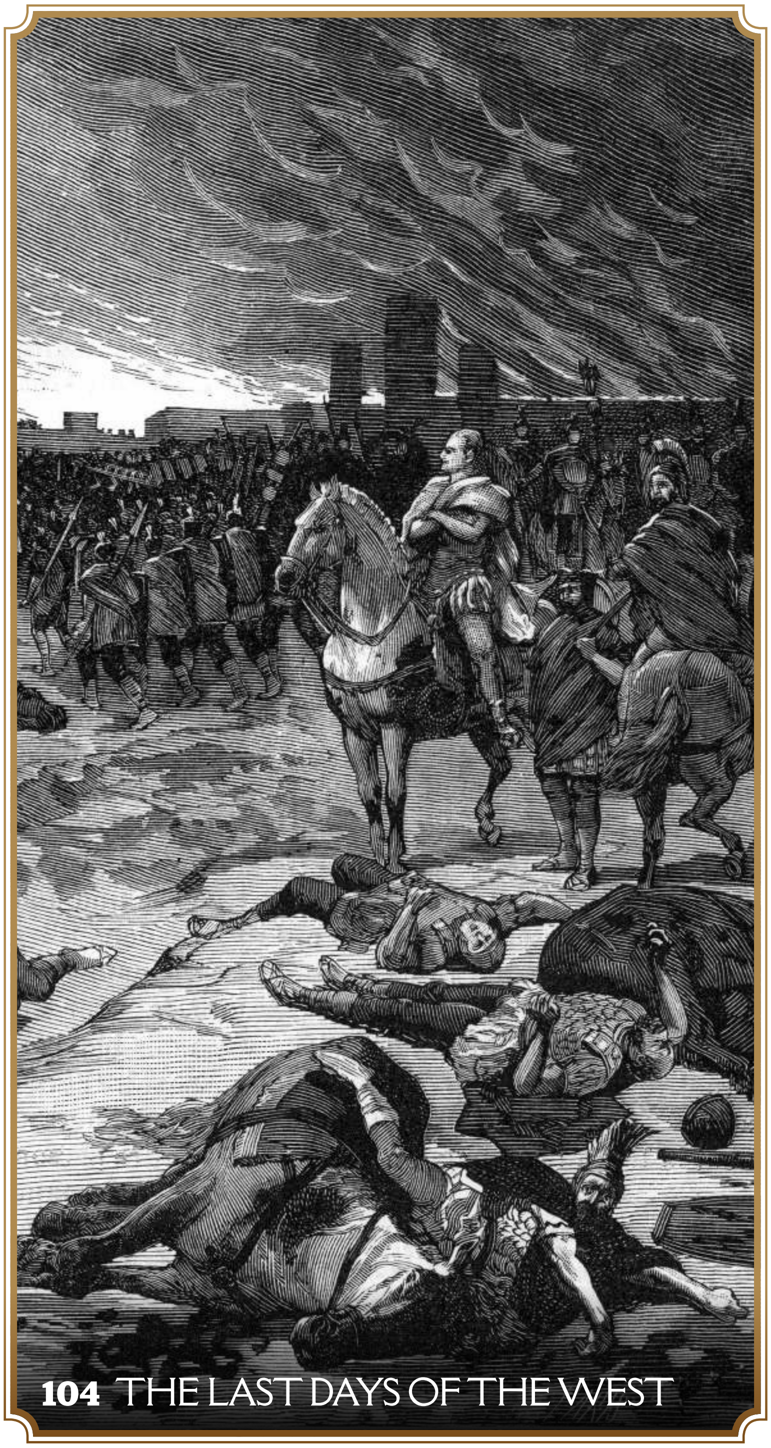
During the winter of 406-407 CE, the river froze. On 31 December 406, taking advantage of this ice bridge, a loose coalition of Vandals, Alans and other tribes poured over the border, devastating Gaul and triggering military revolts in Britain. Taking advantage of the situation, Alaric threatened another invasion by his Goths. Stilicho persuaded the Senate to buy time, literally. It cost 4,000 pounds of gold to buy off Alaric. The rich of the empire grumbled at the cost, and court plotters, seeing Stilicho's prestige weakened, started whispering sedition in the credulous ear of Emperor Honorius. A weak man, Honorius summoned Stilicho to Ravenna, where the emperor had set up court in a city protected by marshes, and put the general to death on 22 August 408.

A year later, Alaric was camped outside Rome. The city, brought to near starvation, bought him off again. Honorius, twisting on the wiles of whichever minister had his ear, tried to alternately buy off, outface and outmanoeuvre Alaric, only for the infuriated king to order his men to sack Rome. It was 24 August 410. It had been 800 years since Rome had been last occupied by its enemies. The shock reverberated around the world.

Honorius clung to power for a further 15 years. But when he died of natural causes, Britain, Spain and much of Gaul were no longer under Roman control. The empire was being dismembered. Rome had not yet fallen, but it was tottering.

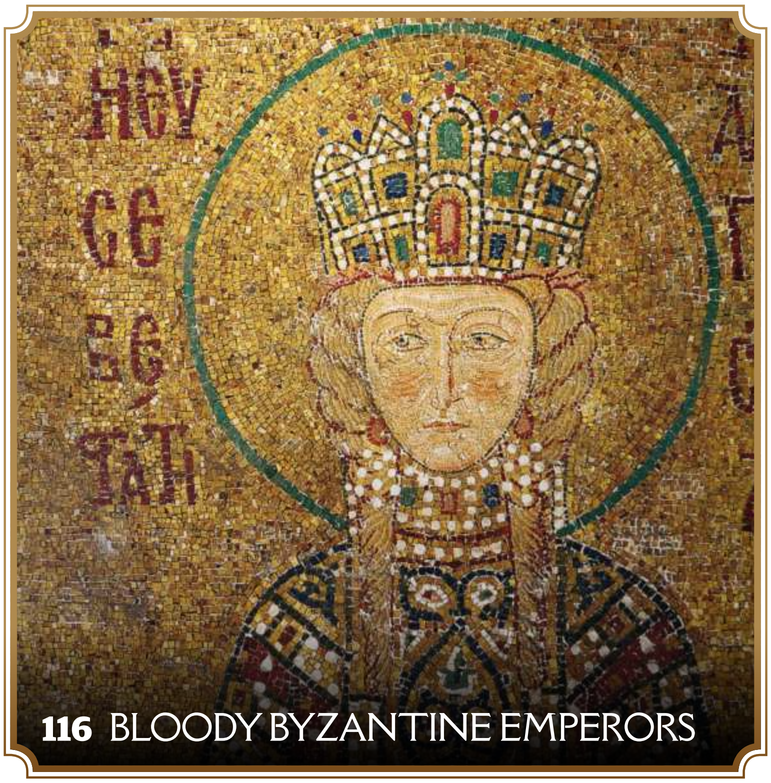
5TH CENTURY

As the Western Empire fell, it was time for the Byzantines to rule the world

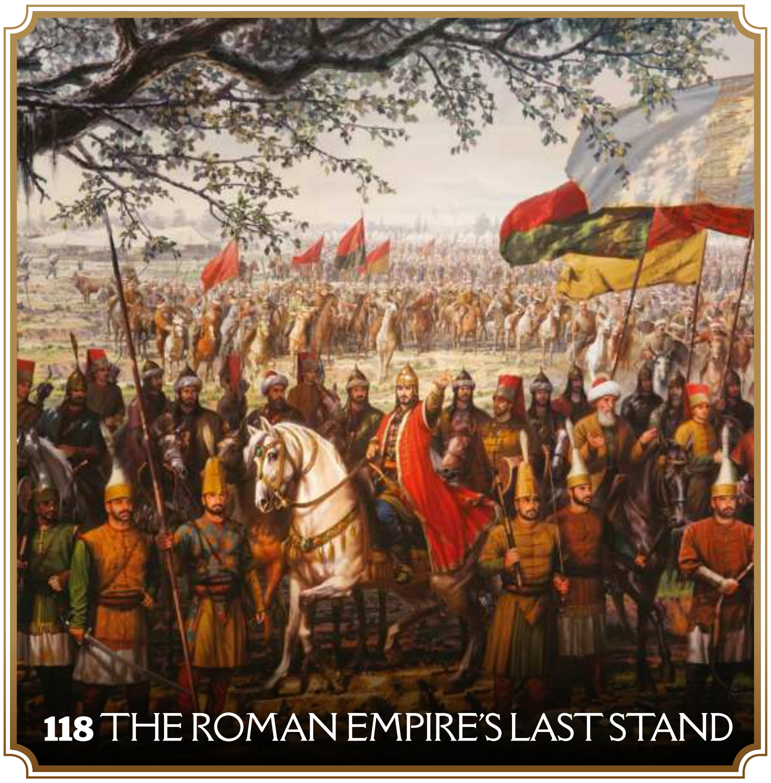


104 THE LAST DAYS OF THE WEST

110 THE BYZANTINE EMPIRE



116 BLOODY BYZANTINE EMPERORS



118 THE ROMAN EMPIRE'S LAST STAND

124 WHAT IF ROME NEVER FELL?

THE LAST DAYS OF THE WEST

The earth-shattering collapse of the Western Roman Empire was the result of invasions, corruption and cruelty

Written by Charlie Ginger

Throughout history, the fall of mighty empires has rarely played out as an instantaneous and devastating collapse, and the demise of the Western Roman Empire was certainly no different. Pinpointing a precise start date for the empire's decline has proven to be a difficult and contentious task, with many historians pointing the finger of blame at Emperor Caracalla's decision to grant all free men within the empire citizenship in 212 CE, thereby removing the main incentive to join the Roman legions and consequently starting a downward spiral that would see Rome forever more struggling to field adequate armies.

Of course, it is too simplistic to apportion the responsibility for the fall of the Western Empire to one single factor, for there were many reasons for its gradual disintegration. By the time of Emperor Avitus' ascension to power in 455 CE, Rome had been sacked twice, once by the Visigoths in 410 CE and then again in the year of Avitus' coronation by a rampant horde of Vandals.

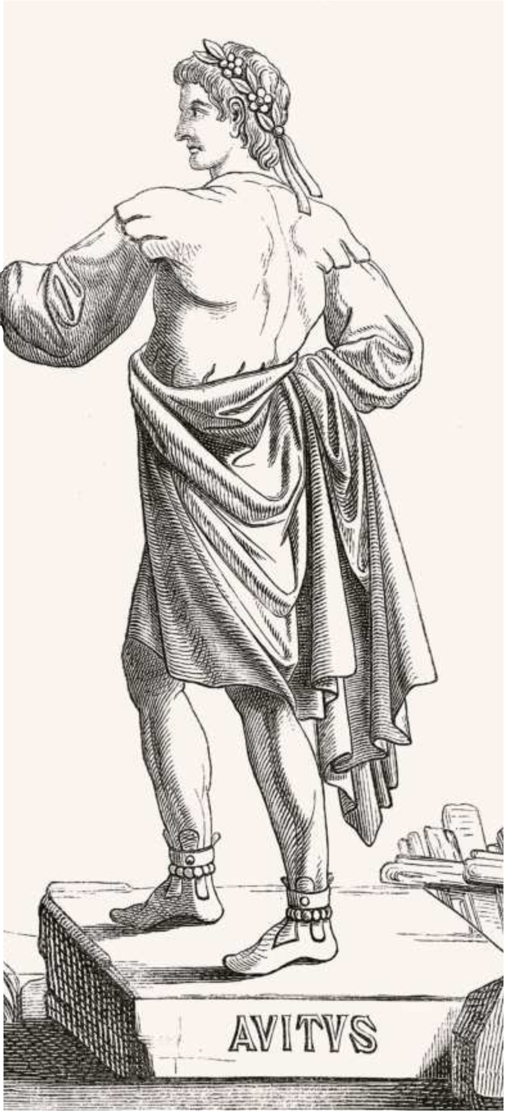
Conscious of his somewhat tenuous grip on power, the newly appointed Avitus moved quickly to appoint a comes (count of the empire) by the name of Ricimer, a general of Germanic descent who would play a major role in the rise and fall of several emperors. Yet the title bestowed upon him by Avitus was not as glamorous as it had previously been, for by 455 CE the once enormous sphere of Roman influence had deflated to such an extent that it now only encompassed a scattering of regions in southern Gaul and the Italian Peninsula itself. It was an empire that Avitus would not rule for very long.

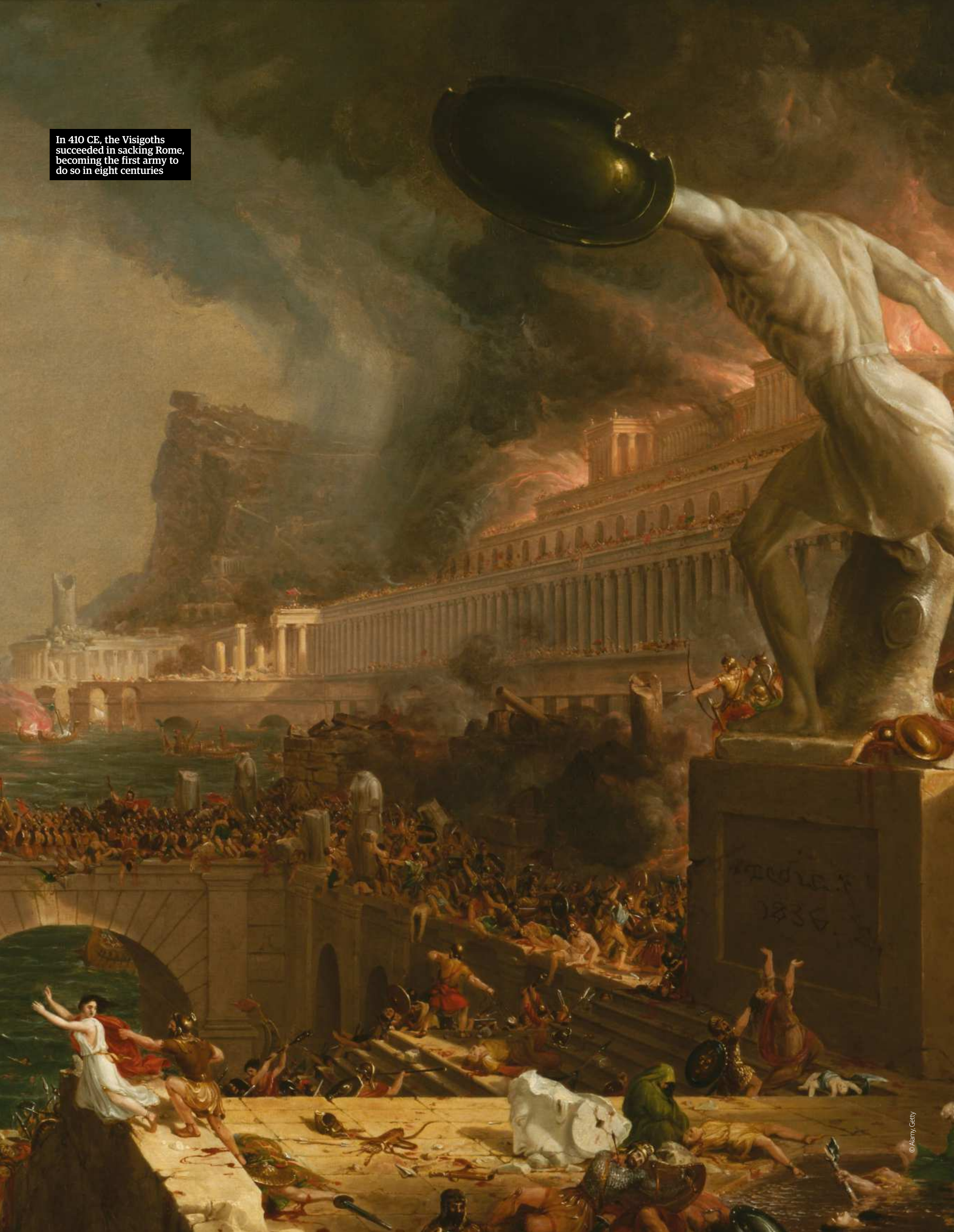
Despite managing to secure an – admittedly doomed – truce with the Vandals during his first winter at the helm, the strength of this agreement was found wanting in March of 456 CE as the Germanic 'barbarians' once again resumed hostilities in the south of Italy. Avitus' failure to completely stem the Vandals' incursions was compounded by the Visigoths' progress in Hispania. The Gaulish ruler of Rome was struggling abroad, and it wasn't long before his domestic unpopularity made his position untenable.

Never slow in seizing an opportunity, Ricimer moved quickly to topple Avitus, who was roundly loathed by Rome's hungry population (a combination of the Vandals choking off Rome's imports and the foreign troops that had accompanied Avitus resulted in food shortages in the wake of the city's destruction). The general's machinations inevitably spurred Avitus to retaliate, but his hopes were to be dashed. Heading an enormous force, Avitus marched to confront Ricimer's own army near Piacenza in northern Italy, only to witness the destruction of his host. With no option but to flee, Avitus is thought to have died during the first month of 457 CE while en route to the safety of Gaul, possibly on the orders of the man who would succeed him, an ally of Ricimer's in the rebellion called Majorian.

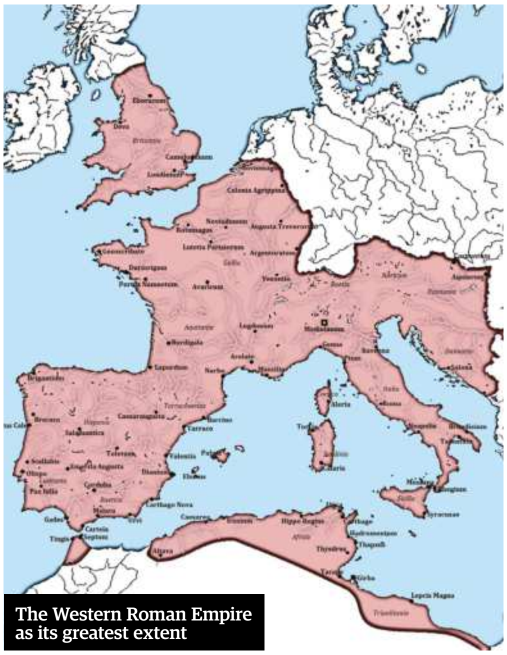
By the time of Majorian's coronation in December 457, the Roman Empire was spiralling terminally towards its demise, a monumental yet gradual collapse resulting from numerous overlapping factors, a primary one being continuous barbarian invasions.

In its prime, the empire had often crushed such uprisings with relative ease, but conquest and consolidation cost the empire vast sums of money – funds that, as time went by, could no longer be supplied in the form of war booty. Instead Rome's leaders had to look closer to home, taxing

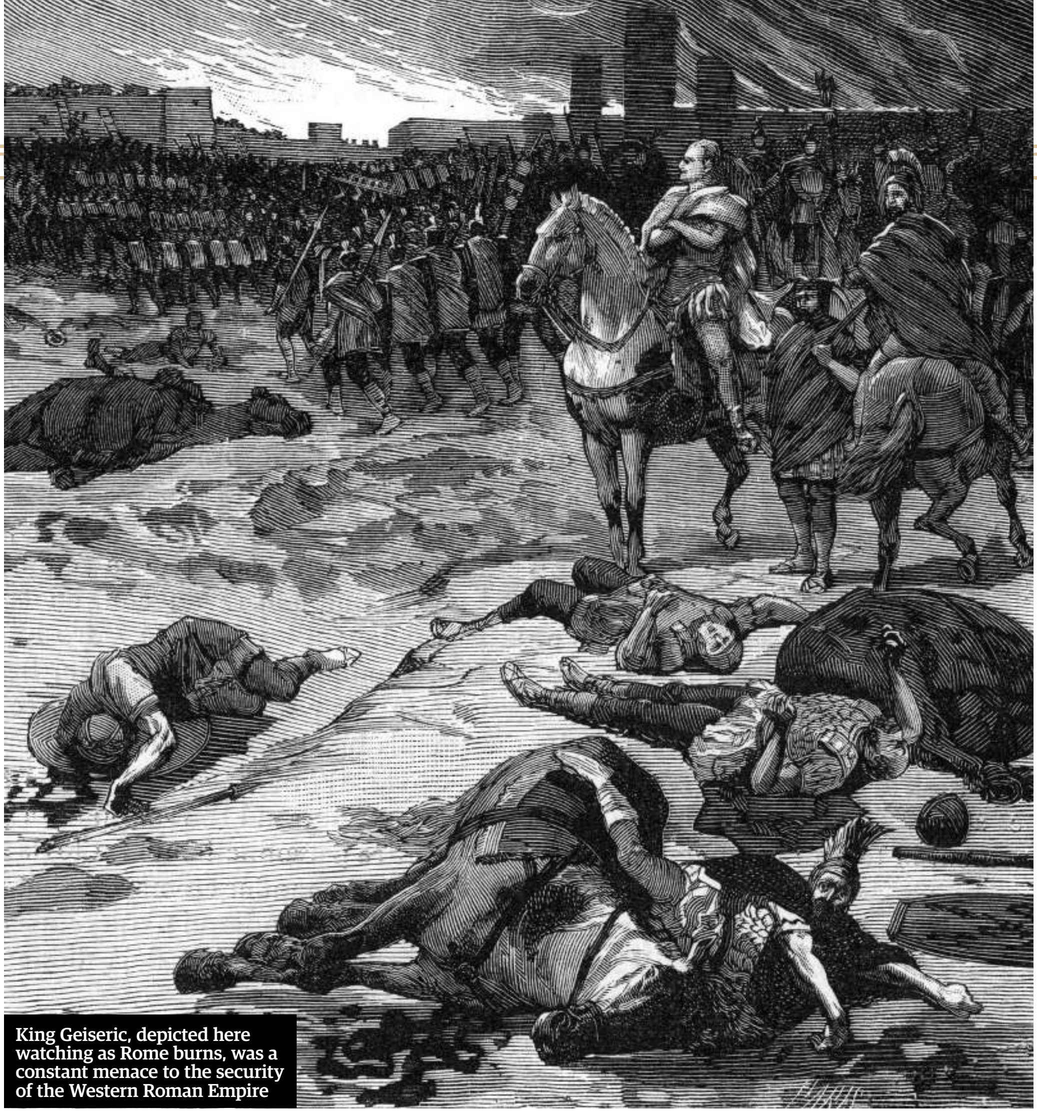



In 410 CE, the Visigoths succeeded in sacking Rome, becoming the first army to do so in eight centuries

© Alamy, Getty



The Western Roman Empire as its greatest extent



King Geiseric, depicted here watching as Rome burns, was a constant menace to the security of the Western Roman Empire

the wealthiest of its citizens in a desperate bid to support a failing military machine.

This necessary measure inevitably alienated the city's monied inhabitants, many of whom resorted to leaving Rome in order to keep hold of their wealth. When coupled with rampant corruption within the Senate and the inevitable decline in slave labour that accompanied the empire's halting expansion, this widespread avoidance of tax only served to weaken an already financially shaky empire at a time when enemies such as the Huns, Goths and Vandals were strengthening, the latter of which had inflicted a chastening lesson on Rome in 435 CE when they began to settle across North Africa, a development the Romans were powerless to stop. If the empire was going to survive, this vital region would have to be reclaimed, a goal that Majorian quickly set his sights on.

An astute leader who sought to curtail the financial deviance so damaging to his beleaguered realm, Majorian took his administrative obligations as seriously as his military ones, yet he is best remembered for his martial efforts. Intent on resurrecting Rome's crumbling empire, Majorian swiftly smashed an Alemmanic (German tribe) invasion before storming into Gaul in 458 and putting King Theodoric II's Visigoth force to the sword at the Battle of Arelate. Success in Hispania would follow for an emperor described by many scholars as brilliant in every respect. However, glory in the field of battle would prove elusive just when Majorian needed it most.

Hungry to reclaim the precious resources of North Africa, Majorian had wisely accrued a fleet of 300 vessels with which to transport an invasion force across the Mediterranean and onto the shores of the former Carthaginian Empire. Sadly for the ambitious emperor, he would never even get the chance to attempt a crossing, for his entire fleet was systematically destroyed while anchored off the coast of Hispania by men in his own ranks who had treacherously accepted payment from the Vandals to betray Rome.

Crushed by this astounding reversal, Majorian soon made for Rome. Upon reaching the city he must have been startled to be arrested by none other than his old ally Ricimer. His incarceration was tortuous but brief, for five days later Majorian was beheaded on 7 August 461 CE. Yet again, the empire was in need of an emperor.

> "Thankfully for the West's cause, this period of unrest between both halves of the empire wouldn't last"

A brief jostle for power ensued as Emperor Leo I of the Eastern Empire sought to promote a candidate of his choosing, but Ricimer would triumph in the end with the eventual appointment of Libius Severus, a man who would rule (under the watchful gaze of Ricimer) for four years before dying of natural causes.

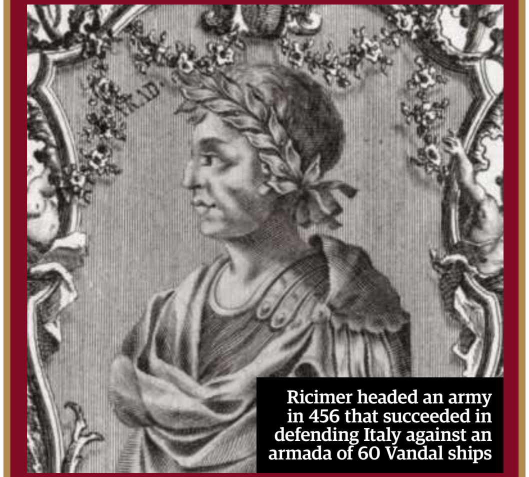
Thankfully for the West's cause, this period of unrest between both halves of the empire wouldn't last, with the ascension of Anthemius as emperor in 467 CE, an elevation that pleased both Ricimer and Leo I. However, while the two realms worked to come together again, the differences between them were many and stark.

While its sibling struggled with numerous issues, the Eastern Roman Empire went from strength to strength as the 5th century wore on. Blessed with greater financial resources than the West, the East was better placed to bribe ambitious barbarian leaders, which it did successfully when it came to keeping the ruthless Attila the Hun at bay. By contrast, the West suffered greatly at the hands of Attila prior to his death in 453 CE, both indirectly due to the sudden influx of refugees that poured across the Roman borders as the Huns rampaged across Europe, and as a direct result of his invasion of northern Italy.

If gold didn't prove sufficiently enticing to ward off an invasion, the East – again, thanks to its wealth – could rely on a stable standing army to defend it (not to mention the imposing walls erected to protect Constantinople, a fixture that thwarted Attila's efforts to take the city), something that only served to encourage invading tribes to turn their attentions to the weaker West. Of these tribes, the Vandals consistently proved to be a thorn in Roman sides, and the situation was no different for Anthemius.

By 468 CE, Anthemius was a year into what was turning into a promising reign. Supported by both the ever-present Ricimer and his counterpart

ROME'S KINGMAKER

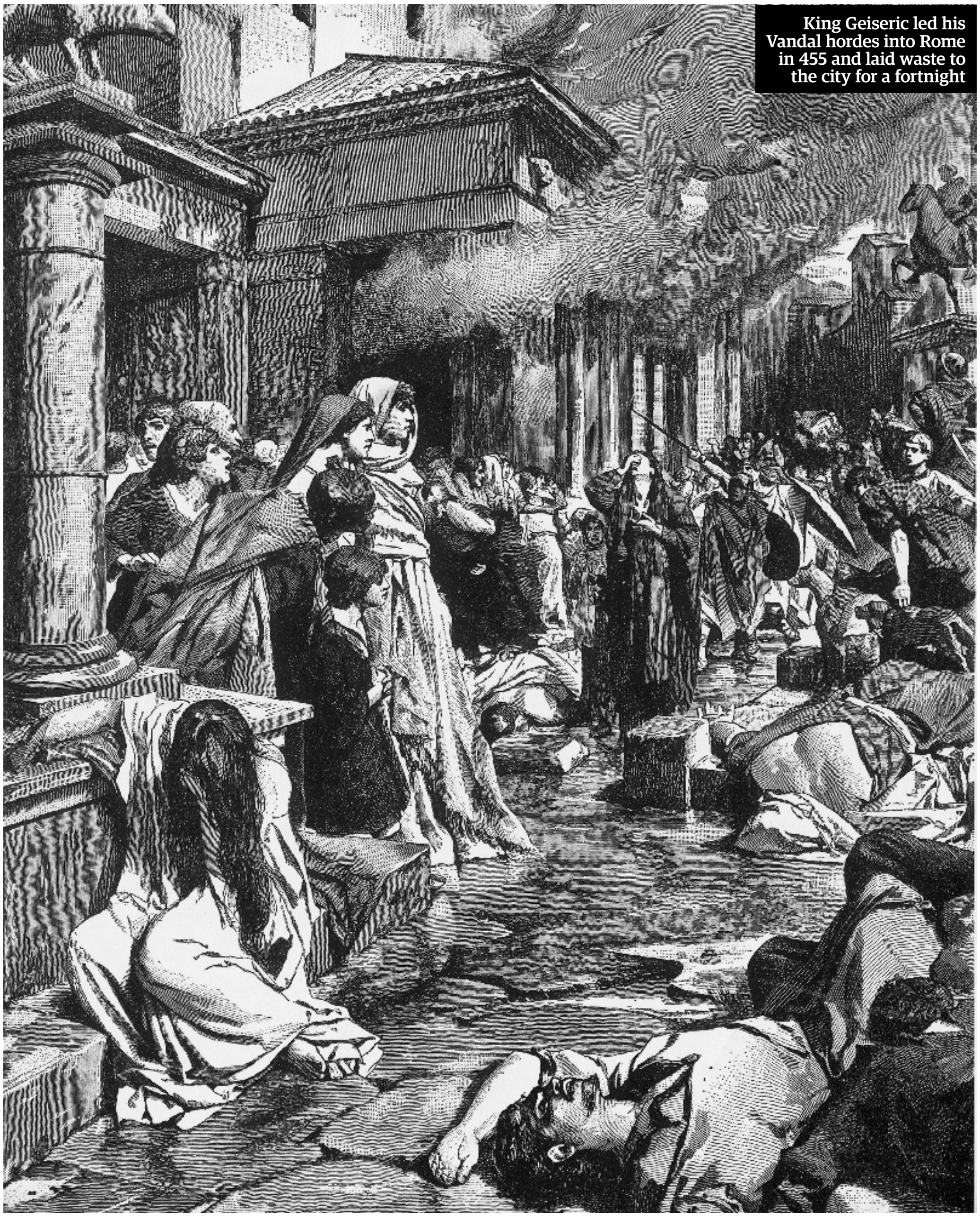


Ricimer headed an army in 456 that succeeded in defending Italy against an armada of 60 Vandal ships

Born in 405 CE to Rechila, a member of the Germanic Suebi tribe and King of Galicia, a region in what is today northern Spain, and his wife, a daughter of the King of the Visigoths, Flavius Ricimer would grow into a ferociously ambitious young man who refused to allow his barbarian lineage to hold him back.

It is estimated that Ricimer began his service to the Roman military in the early 420s. He would rise rapidly through the ranks, befriending a future emperor in a man called Majorian and raising his own forces in the mid 450s with which to crush the Vandals in two key engagements. Both of these victories came in 456 CE at the battles of Agrigentum and Corsica – achievements that gained him heroic status back in Rome.

With glory on the field secured, Ricimer turned his attention back to Rome's political scene, aiding his former comrade Majorian in toppling Avitus and stealing the throne. Unable to rule due to his background and Christian faith, Ricimer determined to take a slightly subtler route to power, controlling a number of Western Roman emperors for almost 20 years, during which time any incumbent ruler who displeased him quickly found themselves removed from power – violently.



King Geiseric led his Vandal hordes into Rome in 455 and laid waste to the city for a fortnight

in the East, Leo I, Anthemius enjoyed cordial relations with the other half of the empire, a unity that resulted in both sides determining to work as one to finally put an end to the Vandal presence in North Africa.

Led by the brilliantly named Basiliscus (Leo I's brother-in-law), an armada of approximately 1,000 ships set sail for what is today the coast of Tunisia with a vast army of both Western and Eastern troops onboard. Yet while this new invasion force would better Majorian's in actually making landfall, their hopes of victory were dashed just as brutally at the Battle of Cape Bon.

Alert to the real and pressing threat to his empire, King Geiseric sent forth a wave of fireships into the Roman ranks before unleashing his own fleet, causing truly catastrophic losses of 10,000 men and 100 vessels. In one fell swoop the Germanic ruler and one-time sacker of Rome extinguished (according to many historians) the last remaining hope of survival for the Western Roman Empire.

Bereft of the resources offered by its former African territory, the empire soon found maintaining its armed forces a far heavier burden, one made no easier to bear in 470 CE when a force commanded by Anthemius' son failed to make any headway against the Visigoths in Gaul. With the south lost and Rome's grip on the western provinces loosening, Anthemius' reign appeared doomed, and it was little helped by the Senate's suspicions of a ruler of Greek birth. Even Ricimer's support could no longer be relied on.

In 472 CE the opportunistic general moved against his former friend by declaring Olybrius (a man close to Leo I) as the new emperor of the West following tensions with Anthemius. This inevitably sparked open war between forces loyal to the emperor and those beholden to Ricimer. The conflict culminated in a savage engagement in Rome in which Anthemius' troops were scythed down en masse by a barbarian army that showed no mercy. Clemency was not even afforded to Anthemius, who, having scrambled to the 'safety' of a church (some sources claim St Peter's), was promptly arrested and executed.

No doubt pleased to have yet again bested a political rival and secured power for his chosen candidate, for once Ricimer had played the wrong hand. Olybrius (who was deemed an illegitimate ruler by an outraged Eastern Empire) would only last for seven months, passing away from dropsy. He was soon followed into the afterlife by Ricimer, the indomitable military powerhouse eventually laid low by a haemorrhage.

Olybrius was succeeded four months after his death by a Dalmatian called Glycerius at the behest

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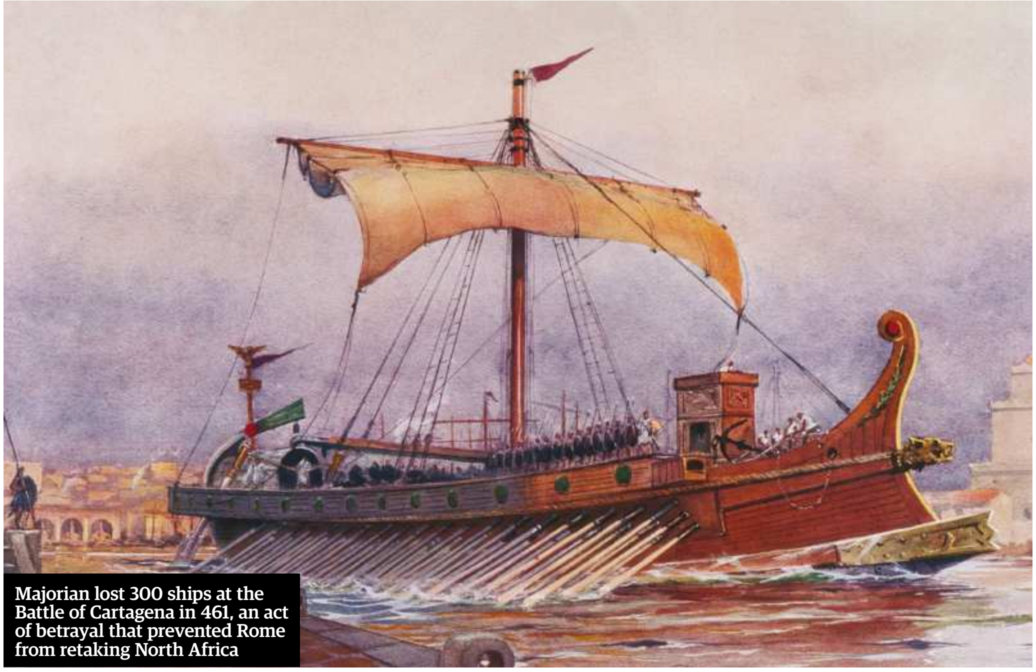


Majorian lost 300 ships at the Battle of Cartagena in 461, an act of betrayal that prevented Rome from retaking North Africa

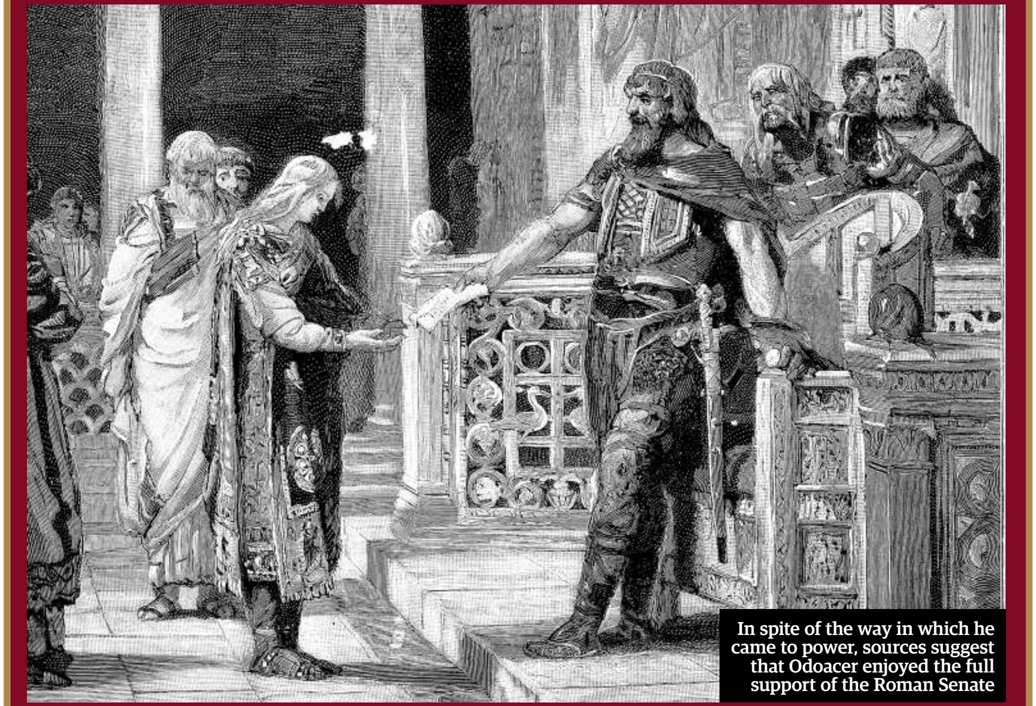
of Gundobad, king of the Burgundians and nephew of Ricimer – a second affront to the East. Without the backing of Ricimer and aware of the East's refusal to accept him as emperor, Glycerius made overtures to Leo I in a bid to heal the rift between the empires. His olive branch was snapped and thrown back in his face with force as Leo, by now hugely unpopular due to his banning of non-religious festivals in the East, not only nominated Julius Nepos as emperor of the West, but then proceeded to send a fleet to invade Italy and claim the throne. This was one of the last acts of Leo's reign, as dysentery claimed him that year, putting an end to a reign that had begun in 457 CE.

As the husband to Leo I's niece, Nepos had extremely close ties to the Eastern emperor's court, which explains why he was Leo's preferred choice to replace Glycerius in the summer of 474. Nepos' fleet duly made for Ostia (near to the port of Rome) in June, landing on Italian soil at a time when Glycerius was hopelessly exposed (his master, Gundobad, had returned to Gaul to rule his kingdom in Burgundy). The hapless usurper had little choice but to quit the city, but he was soon unearthed. Nepos displayed remarkable restraint upon his rise to power, choosing to nominate his predecessor as a bishop instead of having him put to death, an act of kindness that he would one day come to regret.

Nepos' reign would prove to be as short-lived as his new bishop's, but before he was toppled by his own magister militum (senior commanding officer in the Roman military), Orestes, he first had to suffer the ignominy of acknowledging the Gothic kingdom that had been established in Gaul. The fact that he had no alternative but to do so is testament to how feeble the empire was by 475 CE.

Having been ejected from office in August by Orestes, Nepos escaped to his native Dalmatia to 'rule' at a distance. In truth he was emperor in

ODOACER: FIRST KING OF ITALY

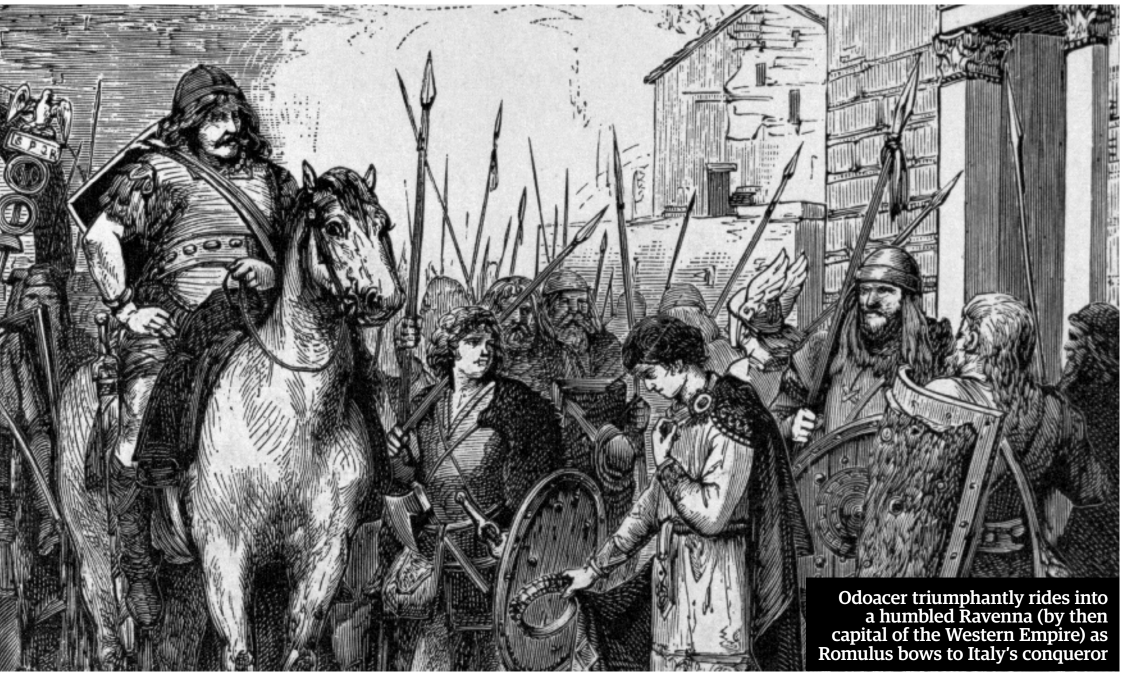


In spite of the way in which he came to power, sources suggest that Odoacer enjoyed the full support of the Roman Senate

Believed to have hailed from the eastern-Germanic Scirii tribe, Odoacer was born in 435. It was by this time Roman custom to provide foederati (barbarian regions loyal to Rome) with various benefits in return for military aid, evidence of how weak the empire had become. As such, Odoacer journeyed to Italy in around 470 CE to serve in the Roman military.

His career fighting for the failing empire, which began during the rule of Anthemius, lasted for around six years, sufficient time to rise to a position of command. By 476 CE, Odoacer clearly felt he and his troops were due some reward for their efforts on Rome's behalf, and initially Orestes, who had recently installed his son Romulus, promised to grant the barbarians under Odoacer the territory they demanded. However, he unwisely chose to renege on this deal, unleashing an uprising that would prove the death of the Western Roman Empire.

During his reign as king of Italy Odoacer enjoyed martial success, conquering the independent region of Dalmatia after a two-year campaign. He would rule until 493 CE, when he fatefully accepted an invitation to a banquet held by King Theodoric, who had been nominated as king of Italy in 488 by the Eastern Roman Emperor Zeno in a bid to depose Odoacer. Ignoring all the rules of hospitality, Theodoric broke bread with his rival before killing him with his own hands by cleaving his enemy in two.



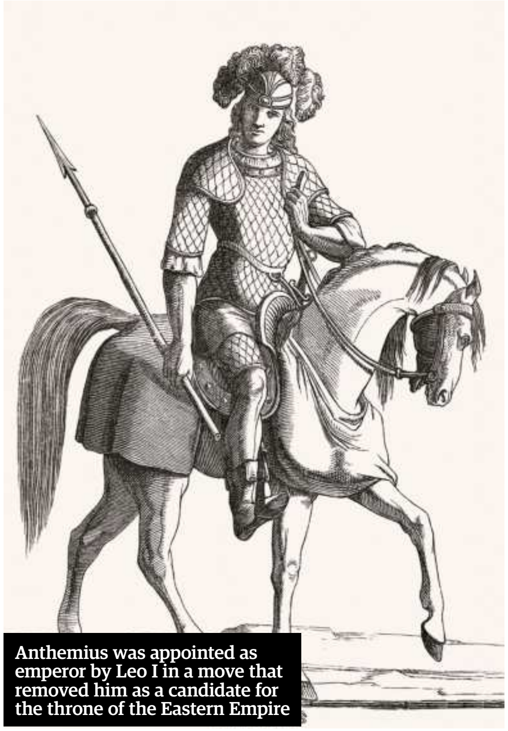
Odoacer triumphantly rides into a humbled Ravenna (by then capital of the Western Empire) as Romulus bows to Italy's conqueror

name alone, for, as was ever the case throughout Roman history, he who controlled the military also held the empire. In this case it was Orestes, a former servant of none other than Attila the Hun.

Despite his sudden and public deposition at the hands of an adviser he should have been able to trust, Nepos would survive until 480 CE. Sources suggest that he was stabbed to death in his own villa, either by friends of a vengeful Glycerius (to whom Nepos owed his life) or on the direct orders of Odoacer, the man who would finally end Rome's rule of Italy.

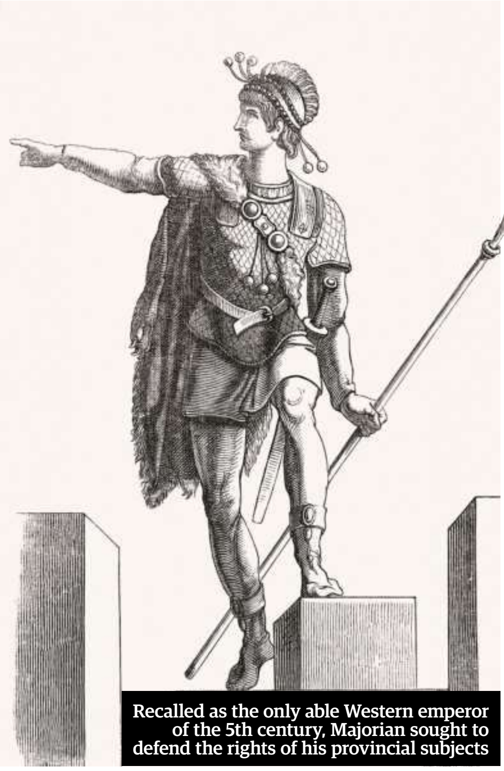
Unusually for the age, Orestes decided not to rule himself, instead opting to crown his 15-year-old son Romulus Augustus as the new leader of a rapidly disintegrating Western Roman Empire in October 475 CE. Even so, his public reluctance to claim the throne for himself was merely an act; as father to the emperor and head of the military, Orestes reigned from the shadows. His lust for power forced his son to bear a poisoned chalice during an ill-fated reign set to end in disaster.

Mocked as 'Romulus Augustulus' (Little Augustus), history has often judged Rome's last emperor harshly, forgetting that he was a teenager forced into office by a father hungry to rule a shattered empire at a time when the formerly stable East was tearing itself apart in a power struggle.



Anthemius was appointed as emperor by Leo I in a move that removed him as a candidate for the throne of the Eastern Empire

Prior to his death in 473, Leo I appointed his seven-year-old grandson Leo II as his heir



Recalled as the only able Western emperor of the 5th century, Majorian sought to defend the rights of his provincial subjects

Crowned in February 474 CE by his seven-year-old son as co-emperor, Zeno ruled as emperor of the Eastern Roman Empire until he was betrayed by a close advisor and Basiliscus (the same man who was so roundly beaten at the Battle of Cape Bon). At the time of Romulus' rise to power Zeno – who, along with his bitter rival for the throne, refused to accept Romulus as emperor in the West – was plotting what would turn out to be a successful return to Constantinople and his throne.

The extent to which Romulus was aware of the troubles in the Eastern Roman Empire is unclear, but either way he had little time to consider its ramifications – rebellion was well and truly afoot in his empire. Emboldened by the knowledge that the West was ailing, a confederation of Germanic tribes led by a formidable warrior named Odoacer decided to test the strength of Orestes' resilience by demanding that one-third of Italy should be handed over to them. When Orestes promptly rebuffed their 'offer', Odoacer ignited a vicious uprising during which a rag-tag army led by Orestes was slaughtered outside the city of Placentia (Piacenza) before their leader was executed. With the empire decapitated by Orestes' death, Odoacer was free to march on Ravenna in northern Italy, where on 2 September 476 CE his mercenary hordes once again set about annihilating a weakened Roman army.

With nothing left standing between him and Odoacer's rampant army, young Romulus had no choice but to bend the knee to Italy's new conqueror and surrender the throne. In a matter of weeks, Odoacer had violently ended 1,200 years of Roman mastery of Italy, and in doing so he struck a final, fatal blow from which the Western Roman Empire would never recover.

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THE BYZANTINE EMPIRE

The dramas of the Eastern Empire were a match for anything that the Western Roman Empire had been able to offer

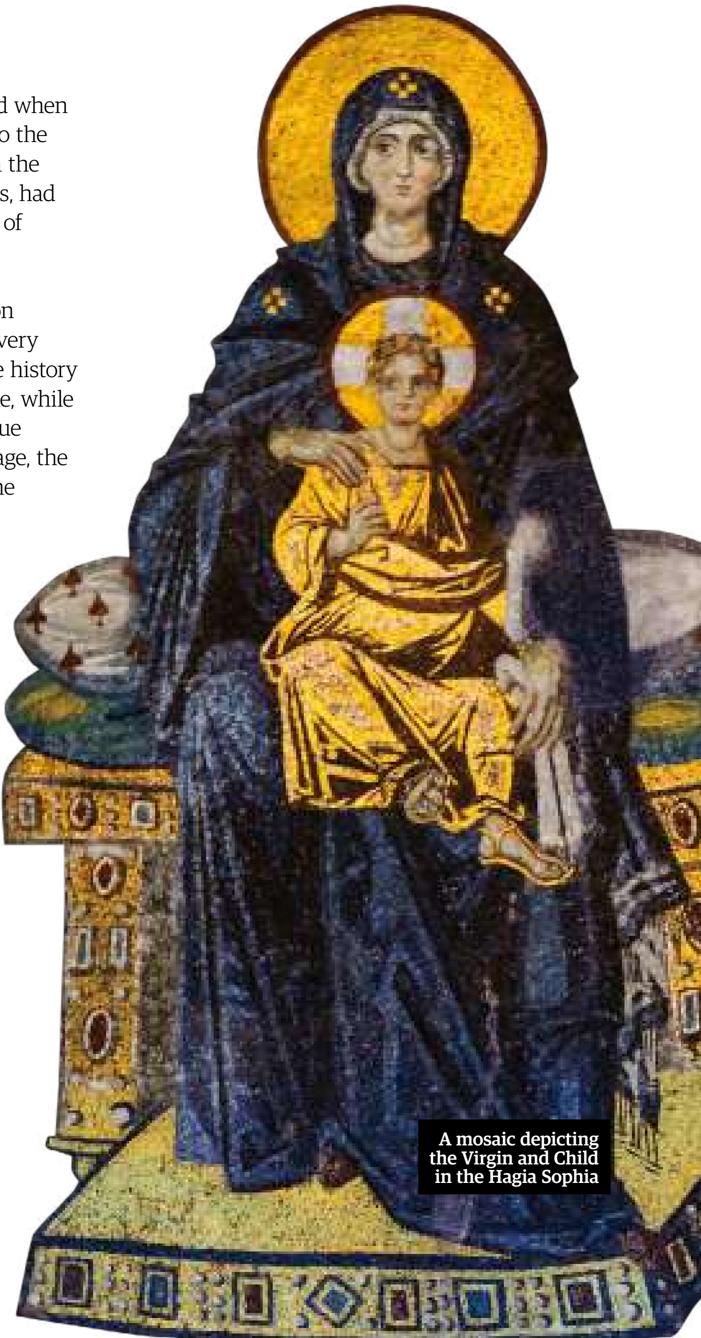
Written by Jon Wright

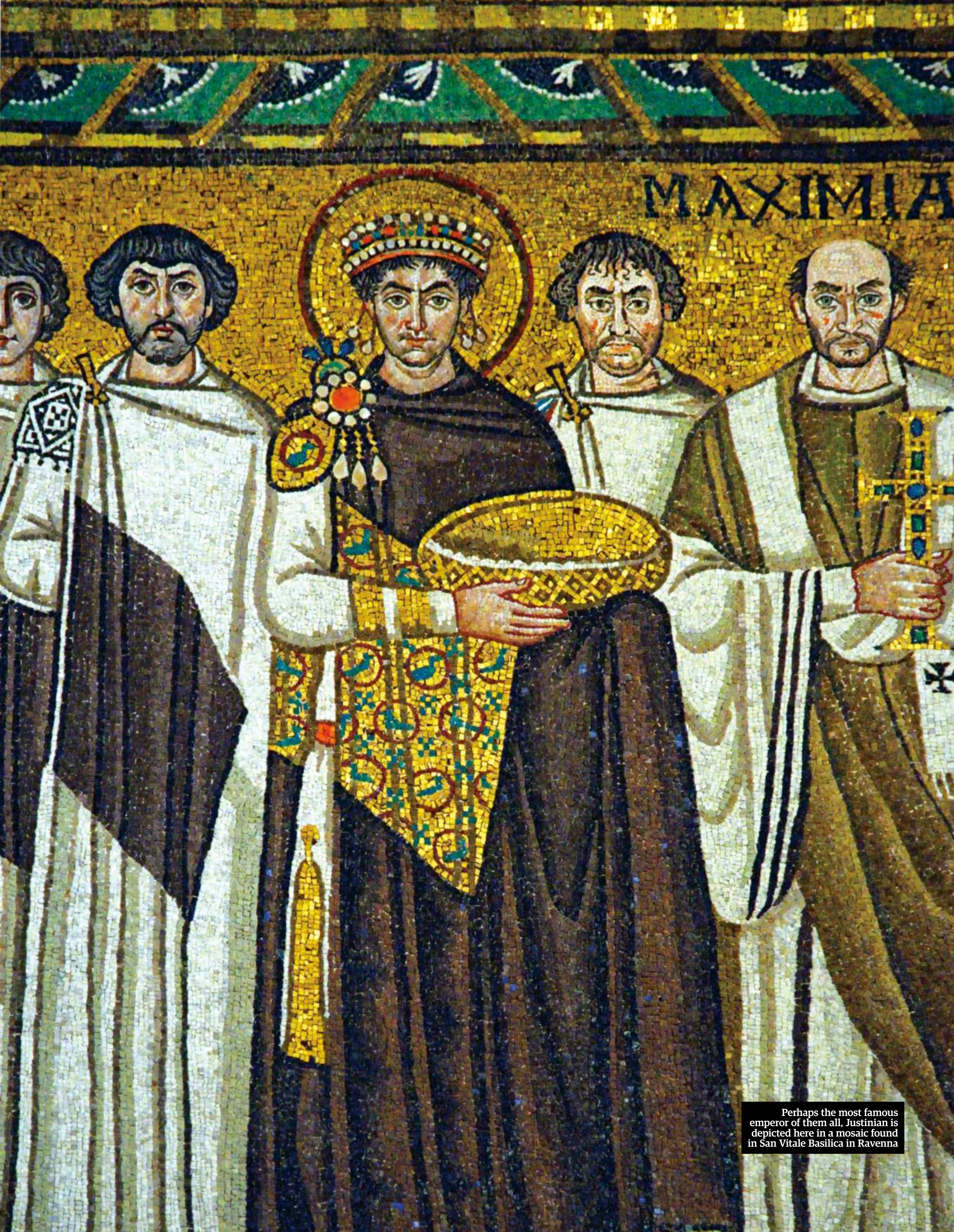
In 968 CE, Liutprand, bishop of Cremona, undertook a challenging diplomatic mission to Constantinople. He was far from impressed by the treatment he received and the people with whom he had to deal. Liutprand complained that the local wine was undrinkable and that his lodgings lacked both fresh water and a roof. As for the Byzantine emperor, well, he was a brute. Nicephorus II, according to Liutprand, was a "monstrosity of man", full of ignorant opinions and as ugly as sin: "Fat-headed and like a mole as to the smallness of his eyes... one whom it would not be pleasant to meet in the middle of the night." The people, in contrast, seemed to adore their emperor, though they were really just a "plebian, barefooted multitude". When Nicephorus paraded through the city, the crowds would shout out in adoration. What they really should have been saying, Liutprand suggested, was "you burnt-out old coal, you fool... you goat foot". Liutprand claims to have found none of the glamour that was supposed to define the Byzantine court. The food was lousy, the clothes were third-rate, and the hospitality extended to visiting dignitaries was atrocious. This, it is fair to say, was an unusual response. Visitors usually raved about how beautiful and civilised Constantinople was, about the cultural riches and the elaborate ceremonies of the eastern city.

Perhaps Liutprand was simply in a bad mood. Or perhaps Constantinople was just going through a bad patch since, just a few decades earlier, Liutprand had been involved in another mission to the Byzantine court and appears to have had rather a jolly time. Constantine VII had been a much better host and Liutprand wrote of the "marvellous and unheard of manner of our reception". The place was filled with gorgeous thrones, bronze lions and mechanical animals. Dinner was served in huge golden bowls covered with purple cloth, and when being introduced, Liutprand was carried into the emperor's presence with great solemnity on the shoulders of eunuchs. The empire, as always, had its ups and downs: a defining characteristic of Byzantine history.

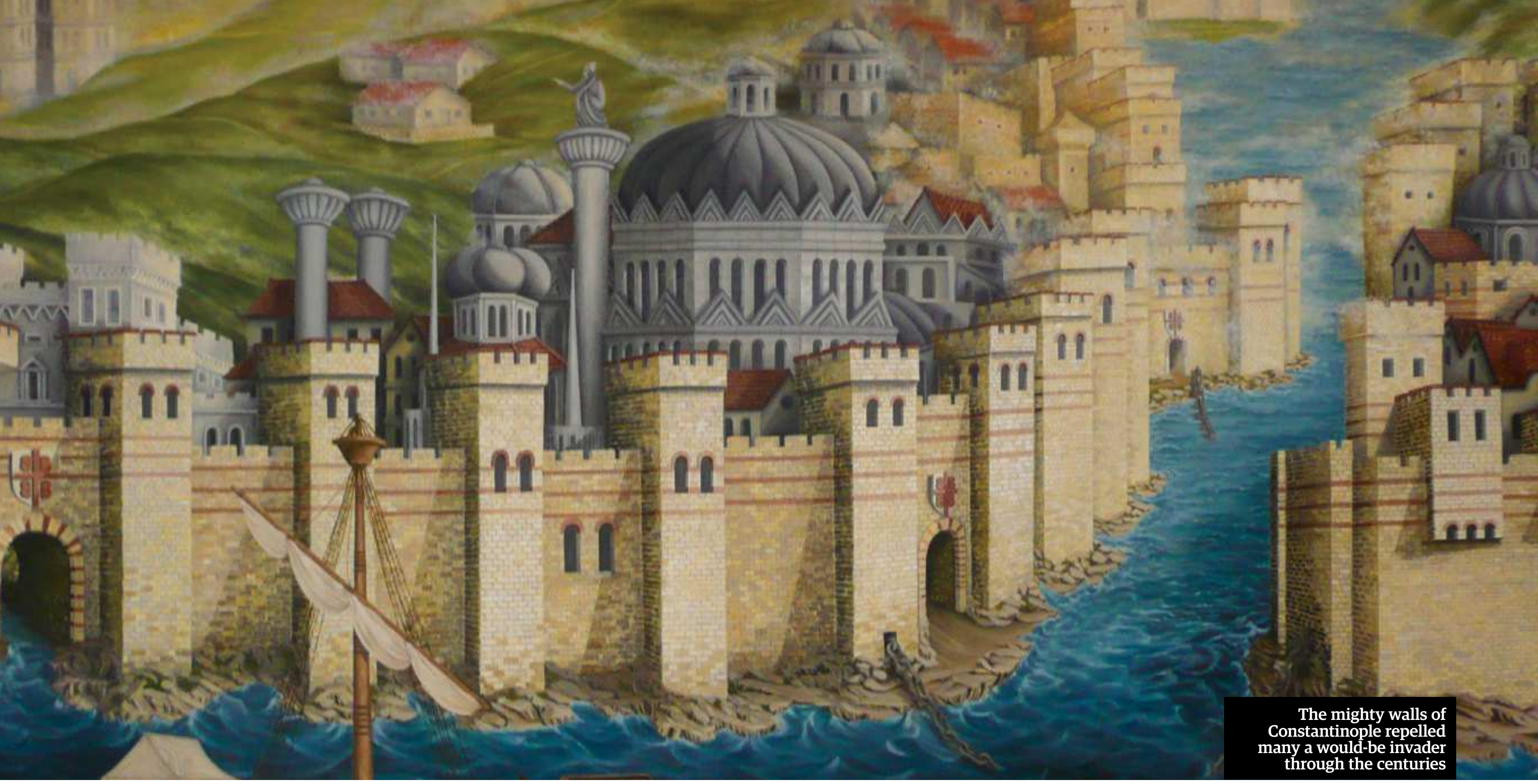
The phrase 'Byzantine' only began to be commonly applied to this mighty civilisation during the 16th century, but it represents a very different, but no less colourful, period in the history of the Roman Empire. And make no mistake, while the empire in the East had its share of unique characteristics - the use of the Greek language, the forms of religious devotion, for example - the Byzantine emperors were always adamant that they, and they alone, were the true successors of earlier rulers in the West.

Though Constantinople had been an important city since the 4th century, it entered its heyday following the fall of the Western Empire in 476 CE. The territories over which it ruled came and went with alarming frequency - indeed the extent of those territories was something of a geopolitical see-saw - and there would be both gifted and atrocious rulers. But Constantinople was mighty. It was blessed by its location on vital trade routes and, however hard Byzantium's enemies tried, the city's famously robust walls rarely succumbed to their onslaughts. As one historian put it: "You can't have a century without a couple of sieges of Constantinople." But it was only with the advance of the Ottomans in the mid 15th century that the empire finally came to an end. By then, a thousand years of triumphs


A mosaic depicting the Virgin and Child in the Hagia Sophia



Perhaps the most famous emperor of them all, Justinian is depicted here in a mosaic found in San Vitale Basilica in Ravenna



The mighty walls of Constantinople repelled many a would-be invader through the centuries

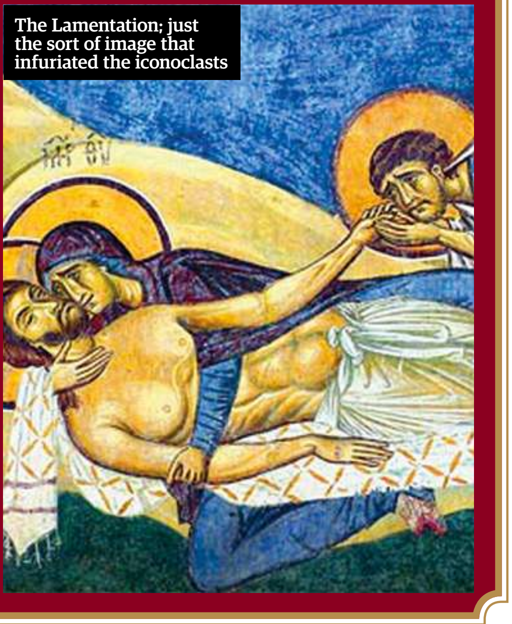
and tribulations had passed – not a bad historical innings. Along the way, the empire had fostered some of the most spectacular artistic and cultural achievements the world had ever seen.

The story began well, under rulers such as the hard-working Anastasius I (r.491-516 CE), an able administrator, but grander dreams had not evaporated. Could the Western Empire, or at least some of it, be reclaimed? Enter Justinian, during whose reign (527-565) the great military leader Belisarius and his colleagues managed to seize parts of Italy, North Africa and southern Spain. The financial cost was exorbitant, but the boost to Byzantine morale was perhaps a price worth paying. Less satisfactory were the attempts to battle Persia, Byzantium's traditional enemy, and, distracted by adventures in the West, the empire failed to rebuff encroachments by the Slavic peoples. Justinian also found time to codify law to reduce the risks of arbitrary justice; his efforts would be reflected in the legal systems of dozens of countries for centuries. He even found time to transform the empire's financial fortunes by introducing the production of silk. Indian monks smuggled in the eggs of silkworms and an irksome dependency on Persian silk was cast off.

PICTURING JESUS

Were religious images sublime or sinful? Opinion was divided in the Eastern Empire

Concern about the portrayal of holy subjects was particularly keen in the Eastern Christian churches. Matters came to a head in the 8th century when the Byzantine emperor Leo III ordered a wide-scale destruction of religious images. Riots ensued and many of the protestors were whipped, exiled or mutilated. Art was burned and, as one contemporary lamented, churches were "scraped down and smeared with ashes". These events provoked uproar in the Western Church and many angry letters were passed between popes and emperors. Images, as Pope Gregory II explained, were of great value because they could instruct the illiterate. The empress Irene approved the use of images in 787 CE. The emperor Theophilus reversed her decision early in the next century, ordering artists to destroy or spit (quite literally) upon their works, inflicting harsh punishments on those who would not comply. An artist named Lazarus was subjected to "such severe tortures that his flesh melted away" and when he stubbornly began work again, following his recovery, red hot irons were pressed into his hands. Happily, by the mid 9th century, the turmoil came to an end and religious art was once again sanctioned in the Eastern Churches.



The Lamentation; just the sort of image that infuriated the iconoclasts

Less happily, Justinian's reign also witnessed an early example of just how febrile Byzantine politics could become. The Nika Insurrection of 532 CE was one of the bloodiest events in the empire's history. Chariot racing was a favourite pastime in Constantinople, with four leading teams and their supporters each sporting a particular colour: the blues and the greens were top of the tree. More was at stake than exciting recreation. The different groups would attempt to influence religious and political affairs and had a bad habit of engaging in street violence. In 532, Justinian's refusal to extend a full pardon to two of the leaders of the blues and greens led to a week-long orgy of riots, house-razing and arson. Thousands were killed and as much as half of the city lay in ruins and rubble.

Losing control in such a way almost got Justinian deposed, but he weathered the storm and set about rebuilding the city. Unfortunately, almost all the territorial gains he had made in the West were lost under his successors and the Byzantines' central dilemma had come into sharp focus. It was surrounded on all sides by enemies and, for the next millennium, or thereabouts, a ludicrous number of conflicts would have to be fought. The Sassanid War in the early 7th century drained the imperial coffers, with the Persians keeping up the pressure and deploying the sneakiest of tactics. The emperor Maurice (r.582-602) had been an ally of the Persian ruler and when Maurice was killed by the ambitious military leader Phocas, Persia swore to avenge the emperor's death. But this was merely an excuse for intervening in Byzantine politics. A decades-long war ensued, with the Persians reaching the gates of Constantinople. The pretense of good intentions soon evaporated and before long, the Persian ruler was describing the Byzantine emperor as his "vile and insensate slave".

Matters improved greatly under Heraclius (r.610-641 CE) who secured a famous victory over the Persians at the Battle of Nineveh in 627. Even his

"Losing control in such a way almost got Justinian deposed, but he weathered the storm"

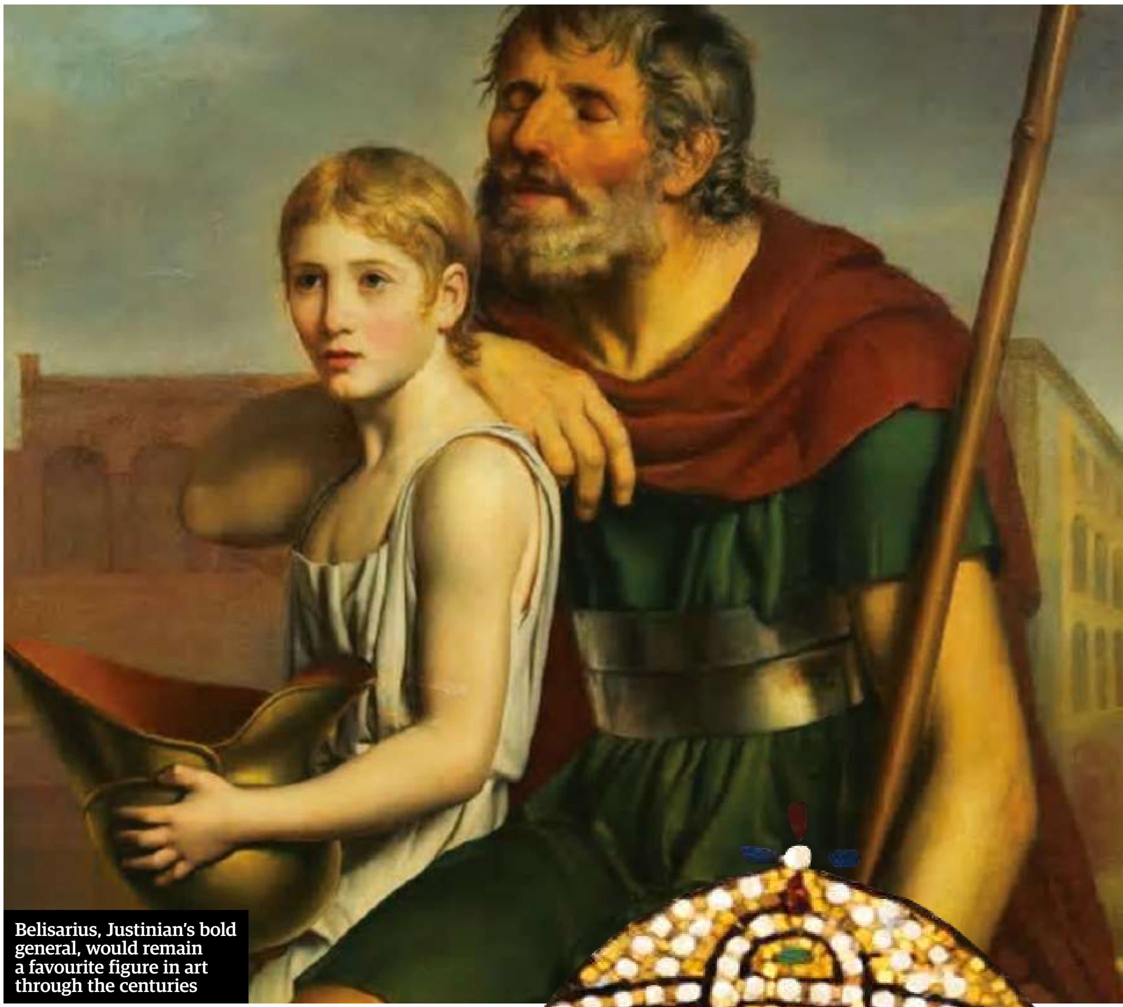
enemies had to concede that he was a ferocious warrior. As a Persian ruler once put it: "He fears these arrows and spears no more than would an anvil." At this very moment, however, the rise of Islamic power in the Near East was in full flow and, due to their financial weakness, both the Persian and Byzantine Empires were vulnerable. During the 7th and 8th centuries, Byzantium would lose Armenia, Syria, North Africa and, most devastatingly, the economically crucial Egypt. Affairs at home were hardly any rosier, with the disruptive quarrel over religious icons creating havoc from the reign of Leo III (r.717-41 CE) through much of the 8th and 9th centuries.

The arrival of the Macedonian dynasty (867-1056 CE) represented another turning point, at least at first. Its founder, Basil I (r.867-86 CE), managed to regain substantial territories but, as so often, his immediate successors squandered his legacy. Lands were lost and, throughout the period, Egypt was never reconquered. It also proved difficult to retake Jerusalem, which provoked a rather famous series of events known as the Crusades - though all the troops that flooded in from the West over the next few centuries were chiefly concerned with asserting their own interests and had no great desire to see the city being placed back in Byzantine hands.

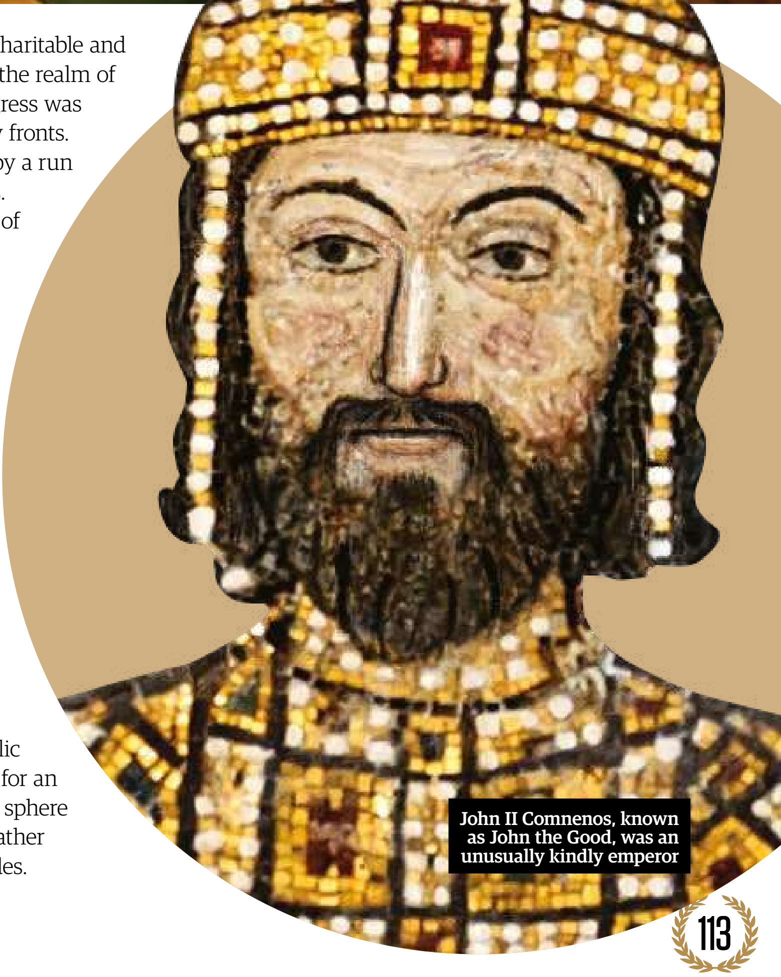
The Macedonian period - particularly during the 10th century under the rule of Constantine VII (r.913-59 CE) - did, however, represent one of the high watermarks in Byzantine cultural achievement: the Macedonian Renaissance. Perhaps no artefact better encapsulates this era's artistic achievements than the so-called Joshua Roll, which depicted the biblical tale in an exquisite 11-foot parchment roll that demonstrates a spare but intoxicating use of colour.

One military superstar also emerged in this period: Basil II (r.976-1025 CE), who managed to claw back Greece, the Balkans, Syria and Georgia, but as sure as eggs is eggs, new foes emerged. The Normans assaulted the empire's Sicilian outposts and, during the reign of Romanos IV Diogenes (r.1068-71 CE), the Seljuk Turks inflicted a devastating defeat on the empire at the 1071 CE Battle of Manzikert. The whole of Anatolia would be lost in the wake of this crushing blow. Yet again, however, Byzantine fortunes were rekindled with the arrival of a new dynasty: the Comnenid. Its greatest glories, under rulers such as Alexios I (r.1081-1118 CE) and the unusually charitable and lenient John II (r.1118-43 CE), lay in the realm of culture and the arts, but some progress was made on the territorial and military fronts. But, of course, they were followed by a run of spectacularly incompetent rulers.

By now, the West had lost much of its respect for Byzantium: indeed, ever since the Frankish ruler Charlemagne had been declared as the Holy Roman emperor and the true successor to Rome in the 9th century, that respect had been steadily fading away. Nor did the great schism between the Eastern and Western Churches in 1054 - stemming from a confusing blend of theological differences - do much to improve relations. The spectacle of a pope and a patriarch of Constantinople mutually excommunicating one another would leave religious scars that endured for centuries. A republic such as Venice was simply waiting for an opportunity to enter the Byzantine sphere of influence and it came, perhaps rather surprisingly, courtesy of the Crusades.

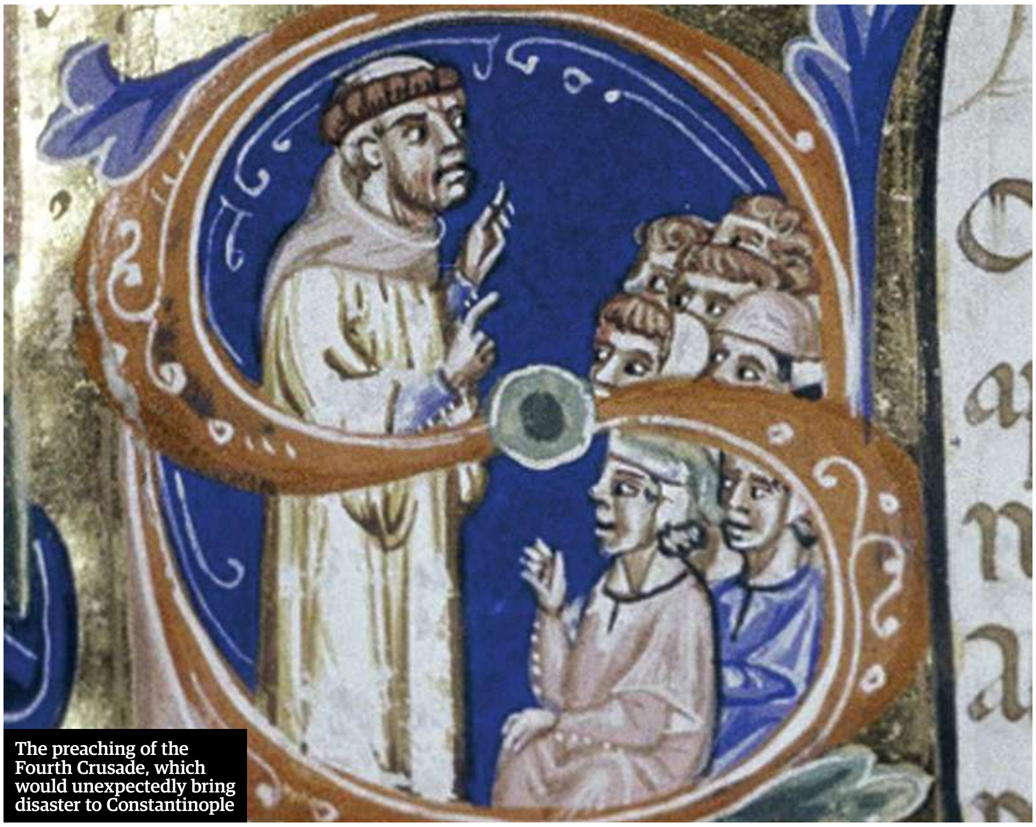


Belisarius, Justinian's bold general, would remain a favourite figure in art through the centuries



John II Comnenos, known as John the Good, was an unusually kindly emperor

"The death knell sounded when the Ottomans under Mehmed II captured the city of Constantinople"



The preaching of the Fourth Crusade, which would unexpectedly bring disaster to Constantinople

Faced with threats from the east, the Byzantines were always hopeful of support from the West, but things went horribly wrong in 1204. A fourth Crusade was launched at the beginning of the 13th century and the original plan was for the crusaders to stop off at Constantinople en route, help restore an emperor, and receive financial and military support in return. Everything went swimmingly for a while, but when the restored emperor Alexios IV (r.1203-04) was killed, the empire was unable to honour its commitments and the enraged Crusaders launched an assault on the city.

Following a siege, the city was sacked and, as once contemporary put it, the "tumult and noise were so great that it seemed as if the very earth and sea were melting together". Western control of Constantinople was established, the empire's territories were divided up between the Western powers and, over the following decades, Byzantine emperors suffered the indignity of ruling in little more than name from exile. Three so-called successor states, all claiming to continue the authentic Byzantine tradition, fell into competition.

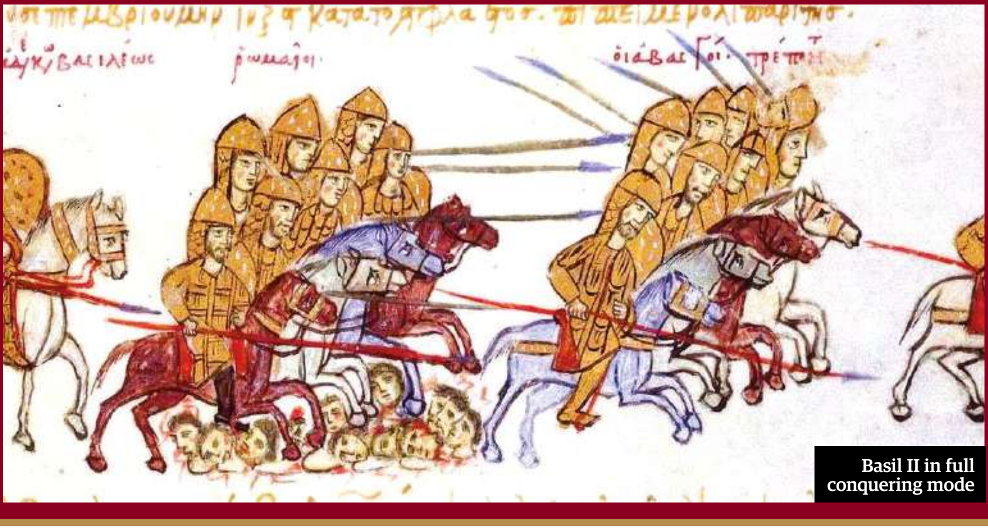
The tables turned under Michael VIII Palaiologos (r.1259-82), who retook Constantinople in 1261 but, as ever, new threats and challenges were on the horizon. The 14th century proved to be one of the worst in Byzantine history, with an absurd number of imperial depositions and civil wars. Into the bargain, the rise of the Ottoman Turks placed the empire in great jeopardy: for periods it was forced to become a vassal state of the Ottomans. Truly embarrassing incidents came thick and fast - the need to pawn the imperial crown jewels in 1343, or John V (r.1341-76) being detained for a spell as a debtor on a trip to Venice.

Ultimately, in 1453, the death knell sounded when the Ottomans under Mehmed II captured the city of Constantinople itself. The rich millennium-long drama that was the fabled Byzantine Empire had all but come to an end. Only the Trebizond Empire, based around northern Anatolia and the Crimea, remained. It had always claimed to be the heart of the true Roman empire, denouncing Byzantium's audacity, but it, too was snuffed out by the Ottomans in 1461.

THE SLAYER OF THE BULGARS

The Byzantine Empire produced many military giants, but few could match Emperor Basil II

Basil II was only five when he came to the Byzantine throne in 976 CE, with his mother acting as regent. He was soon asserting himself, however, and his eventful reign witnessed its share of pretenders and coup attempts. He survived them all. Basil was not a particularly friendly man and was well known for his gruffness and ascetical temperament. But while he was not especially likeable, he garnered a good deal of respect. His military successes were largely to thank for this. His campaigning began badly when his armies were thrashed by the Bulgars at Trajan's Gate, a mountain pass, but things soon looked up. From 997 CE he embarked on a series of epic conquests in Greece, the Balkans and Syria and eventually served up revenge to the Bulgars at Kleidion in 1014. Following the battle, thousands of enemy captives were blinded or mutilated and within four years Basil had secured complete control of Bulgar territory. Further successes followed in Armenia, and the inscription on Basil's tomb said it all: "No one saw my spear lie idle."



Basil II in full conquering mode

It's impossible to deny just how muddled and horrific Byzantine history could sometimes become: a tale of coups, pretenders and internecine strife. The list of usurpations and vengeful treatment of political rivals is almost absurd - Constantine III being poisoned, Justin II going mad, Constantine VI being blinded. Not to mention Michael V's castration, the lynching of Andronicus I, or the sons of Romanos I Lecapenos deposing their father and shipping him off to a monastery. Restraint was rarely shown. Following the death of Heraclius, Constans I emerged victorious from the power struggle in 641 CE and behaved as any self-respecting Byzantine would when it came to his rivals for the throne. Heraclius' widow, Martina, had her tongue cut out and his son, Heraclonas, had his nose chopped off. Both were then banished to the island of Rhodes.

The uncertainty of succession in the empire created many difficulties. It was not a simple father-to-son affair. An ambitious soldier could easily seize power and even those of the humblest origins (Basil I was from peasant stock) had a shot at the top job. This, in a way, was meritocratic, but if an emperor failed to live up to expectations, his days were always numbered.

The wonder, though, is that through all this, the Eastern Empire usually retained its prestige and its economic power. The borders might shift, but a Byzantine solidus was a coin accepted across Europe and beyond - the traveller's cheque of its day. And let's not forget the astonishing cultural and artistic legacy - from art and literature to science and philosophy. Nothing sums this up more elegantly than Hagia Sophia, the church that Justinian built and then rebuilt. As the ancient scholar Procopius explained, the emperor brought in "workmen from every land" and the results were "distinguished by indescribable beauty, excelling both in size and in the harmony of its measures". "No one," Procopius announced, "ever became weary of the spectacle."

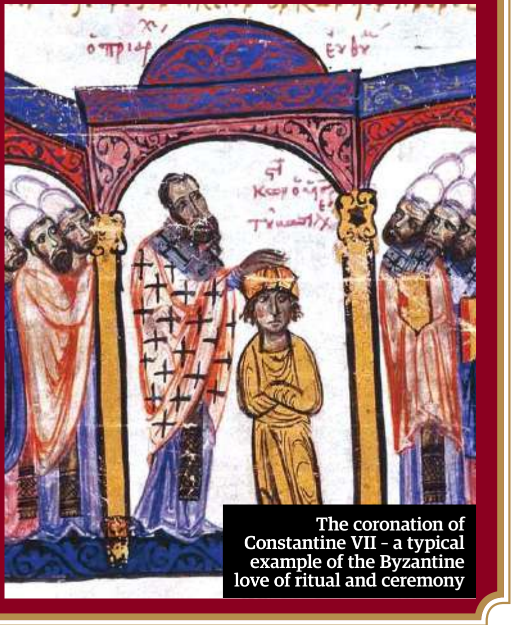
Edward Gibbon, the great 18th-century historian, famously denounced the Byzantine Empire as a place of over-indulgence and petty infighting. It was, he wrote, a Roman empire "contracted and darkened", akin to the mighty Rhine ending in a trickle, losing itself in the sands before reaching the ocean. But there was a good deal more to the story than that.

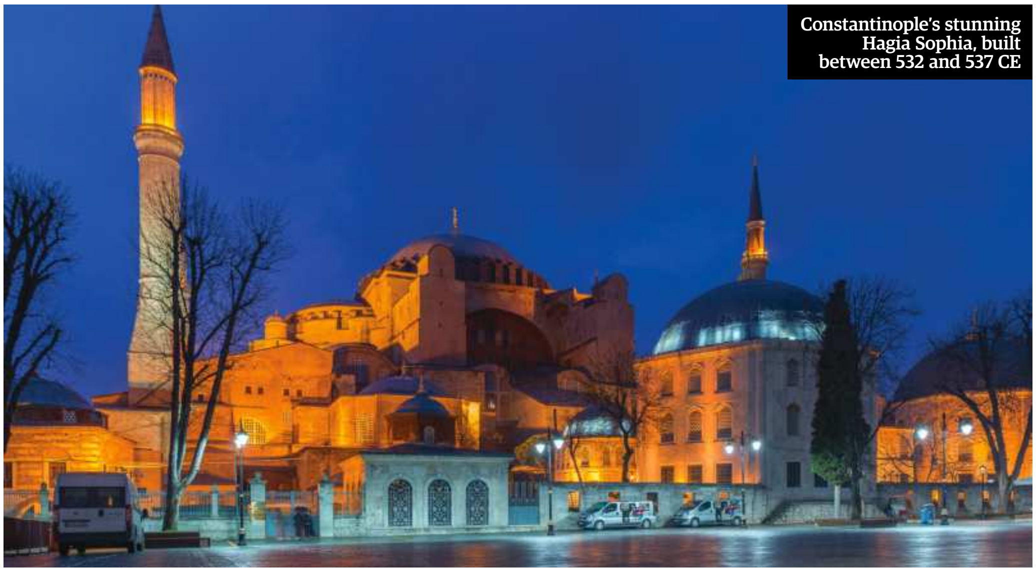
> "A Byzantine solidus was accepted across Europe - the traveller's cheque of its day"

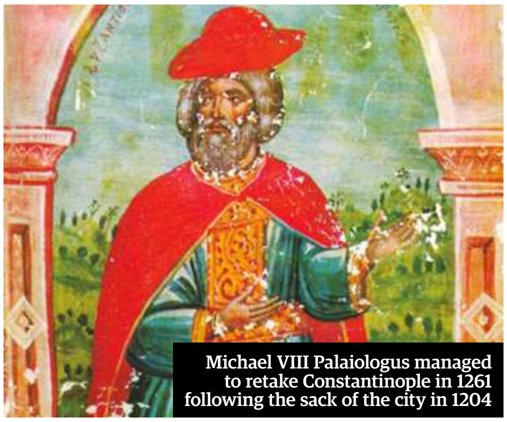
BOWING AND CURTSEYING

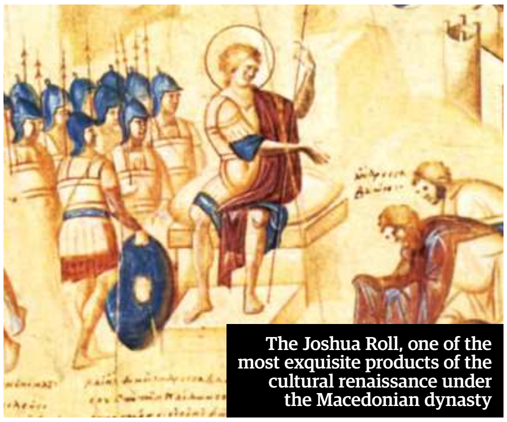
Political life in the Eastern Empire may have sometimes been chaotic, but it was always regulated by intricate rules and rituals

Byzantine emperors were obsessed with every detail of courtly life and protocol. Precedence and status were everything, as reflected in the 10th-century *De Ceremoniis*, or *Book of Ceremonies*, produced under Constantine VII. Readers were instructed about precisely what should happen at religious events, feasts, coronations, marriages and celebrations of military victories. Rubrics concerning the reception of ambassadors and the appointment of officers were also explained. Strict pecking orders were established: how the leaders of other nations should be addressed, what clothes officials were entitled to wear, and what titles were to be used. At the core of all this was the concept of order, taxis, which the Byzantines believed set them apart from barbarian disorder, or ataxia. Overseeing all this were the emperors, who almost always erred on the side of autocracy, demanded total power in religion and politics, and expected complete deference. Stressing this image always made excellent sense for a subject who sought favour or advancement. One text happily played by the rules: "God has raised you, our reverend lord, to the throne of kingship and made you by his grace as you are called, a terrestrial God, to do and act as you will."


The coronation of Constantine VII - a typical example of the Byzantine love of ritual and ceremony


Constantinople's stunning Hagia Sophia, built between 532 and 537 CE


Michael VIII Palaiologus managed to retake Constantinople in 1261 following the sack of the city in 1204


The Joshua Roll, one of the most exquisite products of the cultural renaissance under the Macedonian dynasty

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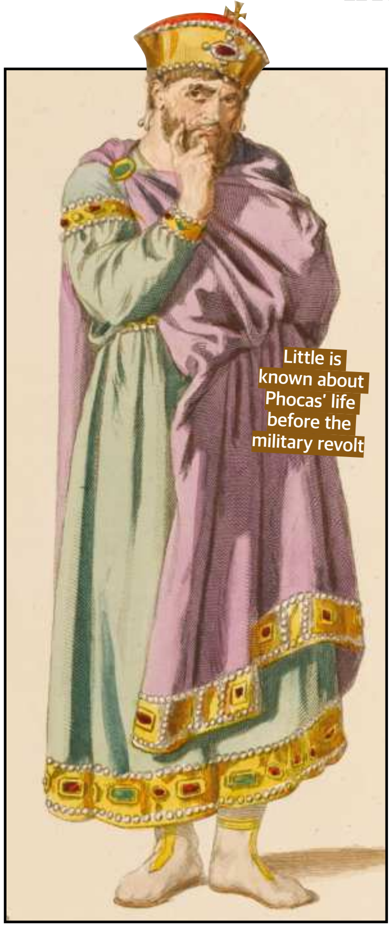
HALL OF FAME BLOODY BYZANTINE EMPERORS

At the heart of the Byzantine Empire was a monarchy that survived on intrigue, deception and bloodthirsty violence

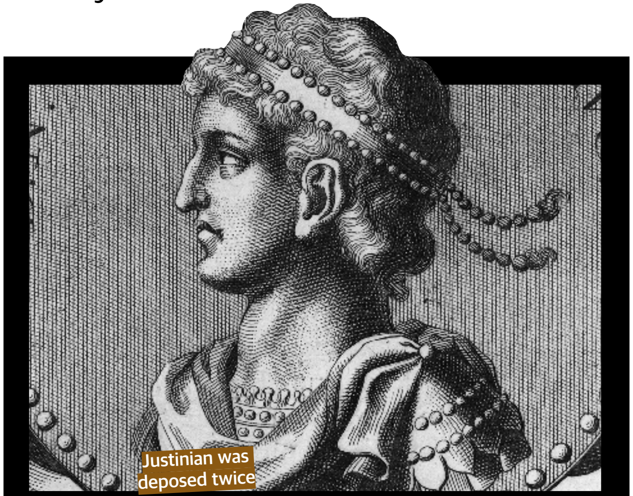


Little is known about Phocas' life before the military revolt

PHOCAS

NON-DYNASTIC C.547-610

Phocas was a member of the army during the reign of Emperor Maurice. A bloody military revolt against Maurice led to his execution and as a vocal opponent of the emperor, Phocas was crowned as the new ruler. Civil war ensued and aristocratic landowners were angered as Phocas stripped them of their power and influence. There were revolts all over the empire as factions sprung up determined to remove the usurper. Constantinople was seized and Phocas was promptly beheaded.

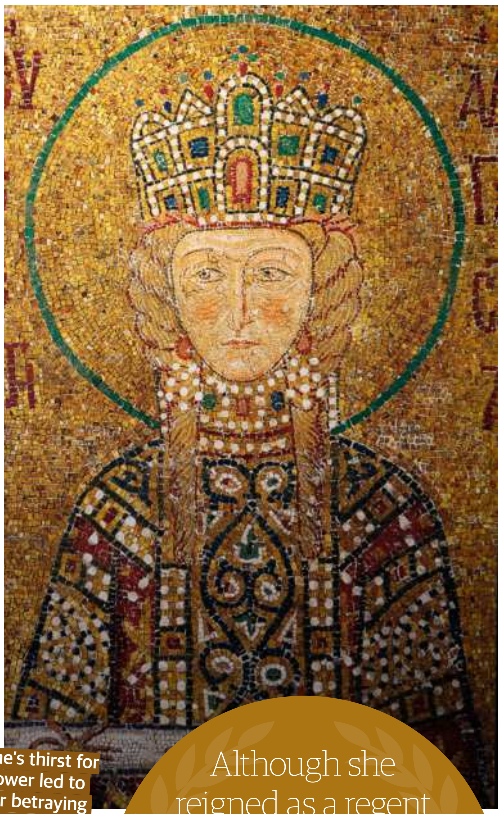


Justinian was deposed twice

JUSTINIAN II

HERACLIAN DYNASTY C.668-711

Justinian's reign was chaotic to say the least. After years of heavy taxation and conflict with the Church, he was deposed in 695. Justinian was mutilated in an attempt to stop him from regaining the throne by having his nose cut off. This led to his moniker 'rhinotmetos' ('slit-nosed'), and he supposedly wore a gold prosthetic. The former emperor plotted his return while in exile, seeking the help of the Khazars, and he was restored to the throne in 705. Cruel and repressive, Justinian only ruled for six years before he was deposed again and executed outside Constantinople.



Irene's thirst for power led to her betraying her own son

IRENE

ISAURIAN DYNASTY C.752-803

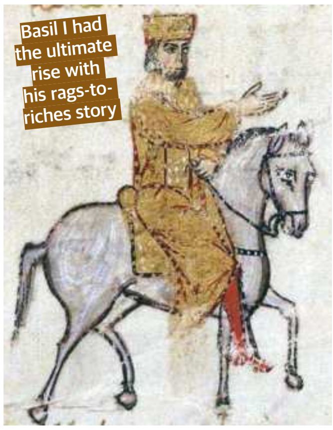
Irene was thrust into a power when she became regent for her son, Constantine VI, after her husband's sudden death in 780. She developed a taste for power and refused to relinquish control to her son for many years, who finally declared himself emperor in 790. Popular support allowed Irene to become Constantine's co-ruler in 792 and by 797 she had successfully deposed him. Irene even had Constantine blinded to prevent him from returning to power. However, Irene's desire to rule alone and refusal to remarry ultimately led to her downfall and deposition in 802. She died impoverished one year later.

> Although she reigned as a regent and co-emperor beforehand, Irene was the first female to rule the Byzantine Empire entirely by herself

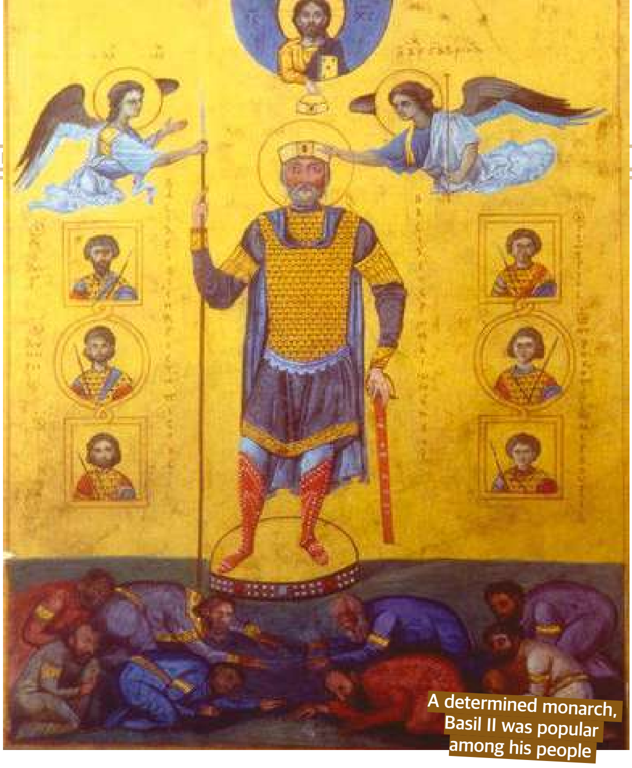
BASIL I

MACEDONIAN DYNASTY 811-86

Though from humble origins, Basil earned the friendship and patronage of Emperor Michael III, who eventually crowned him co-emperor. Basil was a great manipulator and committed a series of murders to clear his path to the throne. When he sensed that Michael's favour for him was waning, he brutally murdered the emperor and his relatives. As ruler, he oversaw a series of conquests that turned the Byzantine Empire into the most dominant power in Europe.



Basil I had the ultimate rise with his rags-to-riches story


A determined monarch, Basil II was popular among his people

BASIL II

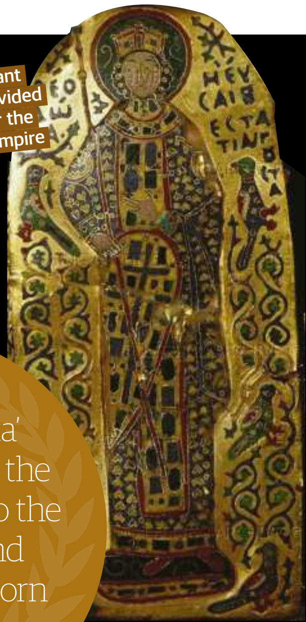
MACEDONIAN DYNASTY 958-1025

Basil the Bulgar-Slayer earned his name after conquering Bulgaria. Merciless and brutal, he blinded the 15,000 Bulgarian soldiers that he captured. In a macabre gesture, he left one eye for every hundred men, so they could lead the others home. Basil was popular with the army, which he joined on campaign instead of barking orders from the safety of his palace. Basil was a shrewd ruler, limiting the power of wealthy landowners after they dared to revolt against him. Despite numerous military campaigns, the economy flourished throughout his reign, and when he died the empire was left with a vast territory.

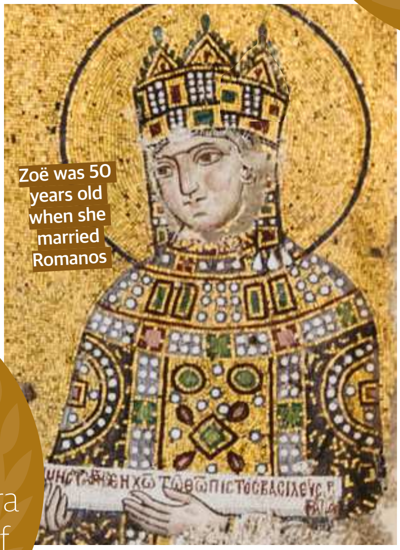
THEODORA PORPHYROGENITA

MACEDONIAN DYNASTY C.980-1056

Empress Theodora was more suited to governing than her sister Zoë, which was proven when she had Michael V blinded to stop him reclaiming power. She lived with her sister's jealousy for years and was confined to a monastery during the Romanos' reign. When Zoë was restored to the throne, Theodora was reluctantly crowned beside her. After the deaths of Zoë and her husband, their co-ruler Constantine IX, Theodora ruled alone and the Macedonian dynasty ended with her.


The reluctant empress provided stability for the Byzantine Empire

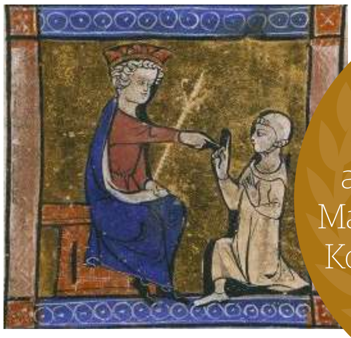
> The name 'Porphyrogenita' means 'born into the purple' – it refers to the fact that Zoë and Theodora were born to a reigning emperor


Zoë was 50 years old when she married Romanos

ZOË PORPHYROGENITA

MACEDONIAN DYNASTY C.978-1050

As a daughter of Constantine VIII, Zoë was next in the Byzantine line of succession. She was known for having numerous love affairs and was rumoured to have killed her first husband, Romanos III, either by drowning or poisoning him. She married her lover, Michael, on the very same day but was then removed from political power until his death as he was afraid that she would turn on him. An uprising against his heir and nephew, Michael V, led to Zoë being restored to the throne alongside her sister Theodora, who promptly took control. A vain woman, Zoë had little interest in governing but resented Theodora for her authority and ability to rule.

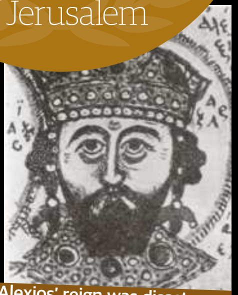


> Andronicus was a womaniser and had numerous affairs, including with Manuel's niece Theodora Komnene, the widow of King Baldwin III of Jerusalem

ANDRONICUS I COMNENUS

KOMNENOI DYNASTY C.1118-85

Andronicus overthrew Empress Maria because of her unpopular favouritism towards Latins – she was the wife of his deceased cousin Manuel I and regent for her son Alexios II. Andronicus forced Alexios to sign his mother's death warrant and eventually had the boy killed. His accession sparked a widespread massacre of Latins within Constantinople, which he did nothing stop. Initially popular, Andronicus became tyrannical and the population revolted. He attempted to escape but was ultimately captured, tortured and killed.


Alexios' reign was disastrous, driving the empire into the ground

ALEXIOS III

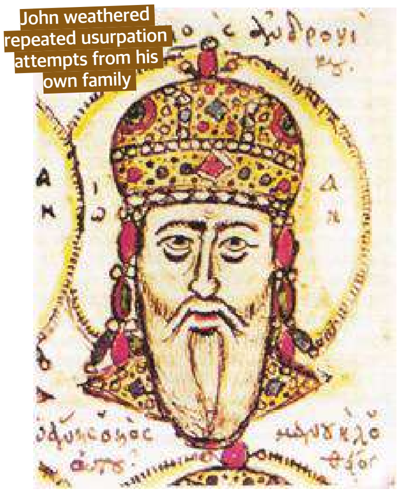
ANGELOS DYNASTY C.1153-1211

Alexios overthrew his younger brother Isaac II, who he blinded and imprisoned. A weak and extravagant man, Alexios spent money like water and depleted the treasury. His ability to govern was poor and he relied heavily on his capable wife, Euphrosyne. It all fell apart when Isaac's son and Alexios' nephew, the future Alexios IV, appealed to the Fourth Crusade for their help in restoring him to the throne. The empire was easy pickings for the Crusaders as Alexios' poor governance had left it in a complete state. Alexios fled abroad in the night and later died in a monastery.

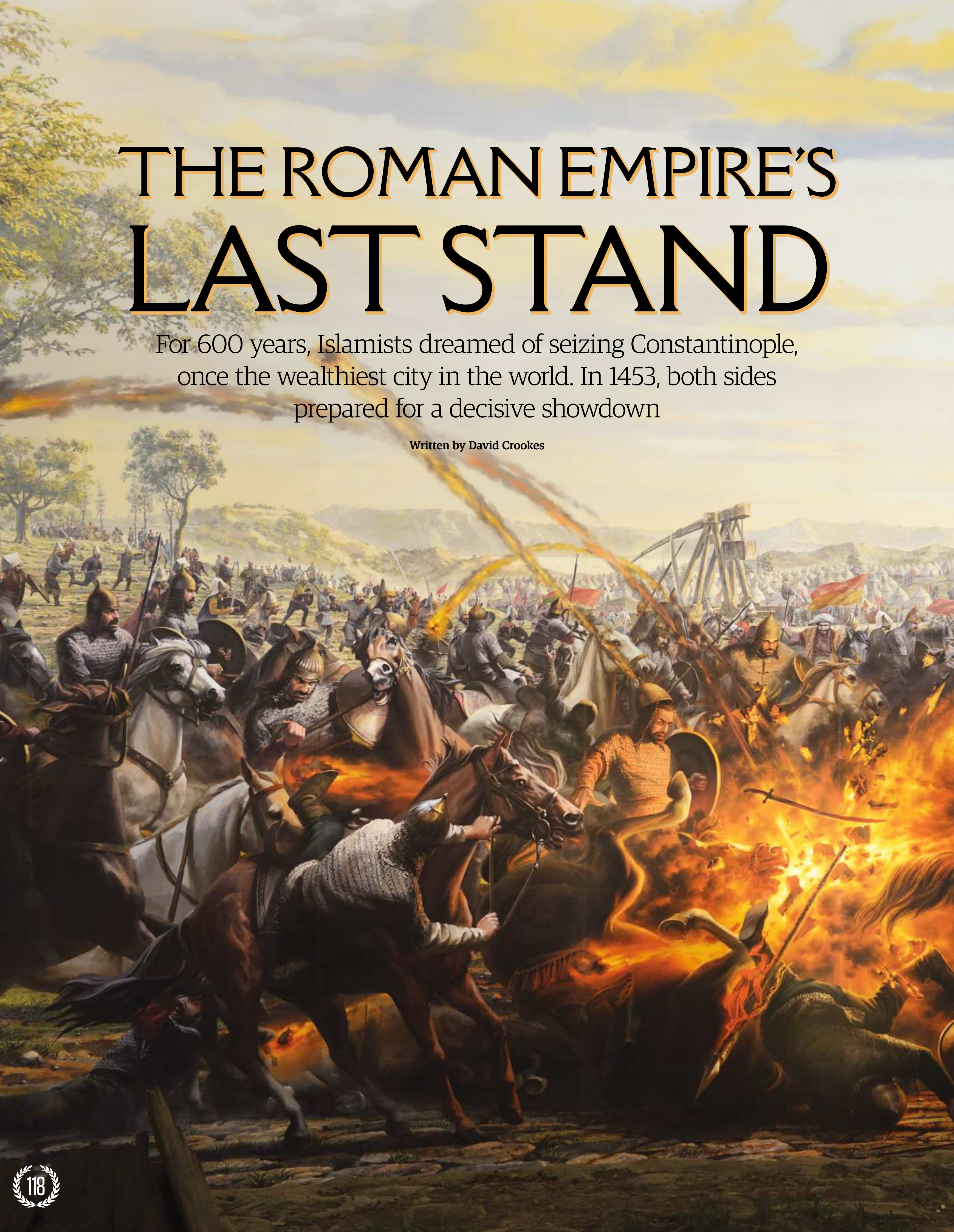
JOHN V PALAEOLOGUS

PALAIOLOGOS DYNASTY 1332-91

Although not a murderous man, John's reign was dominated by violence and rebellion. Ascending to the throne as a young boy, the empire was plunged into a civil war over his regency. John managed to overthrow his regent, his father's old aide, a few years later following a second civil war. He was deposed twice – first by his son, and then by his grandson. John managed to regain the throne both times but was forced to appease his sons with titles.


John weathered repeated usurpation attempts from his own family

© Mary Evans Picture Library, Getty Images



THE ROMAN EMPIRE'S LAST STAND

For 600 years, Islamists dreamed of seizing Constantinople, once the wealthiest city in the world. In 1453, both sides prepared for a decisive showdown

Written by David Crookes

Sultan Mehmed II took his position on a small mound in sight of the walls of the ancient city of Constantinople. Those tasked with defending the city – the stronghold of Orthodox Christianity – from the waves of invaders that threatened her could clearly see his location as they peered across from the city walls over an incredible number of tents situated barely 230 metres away.

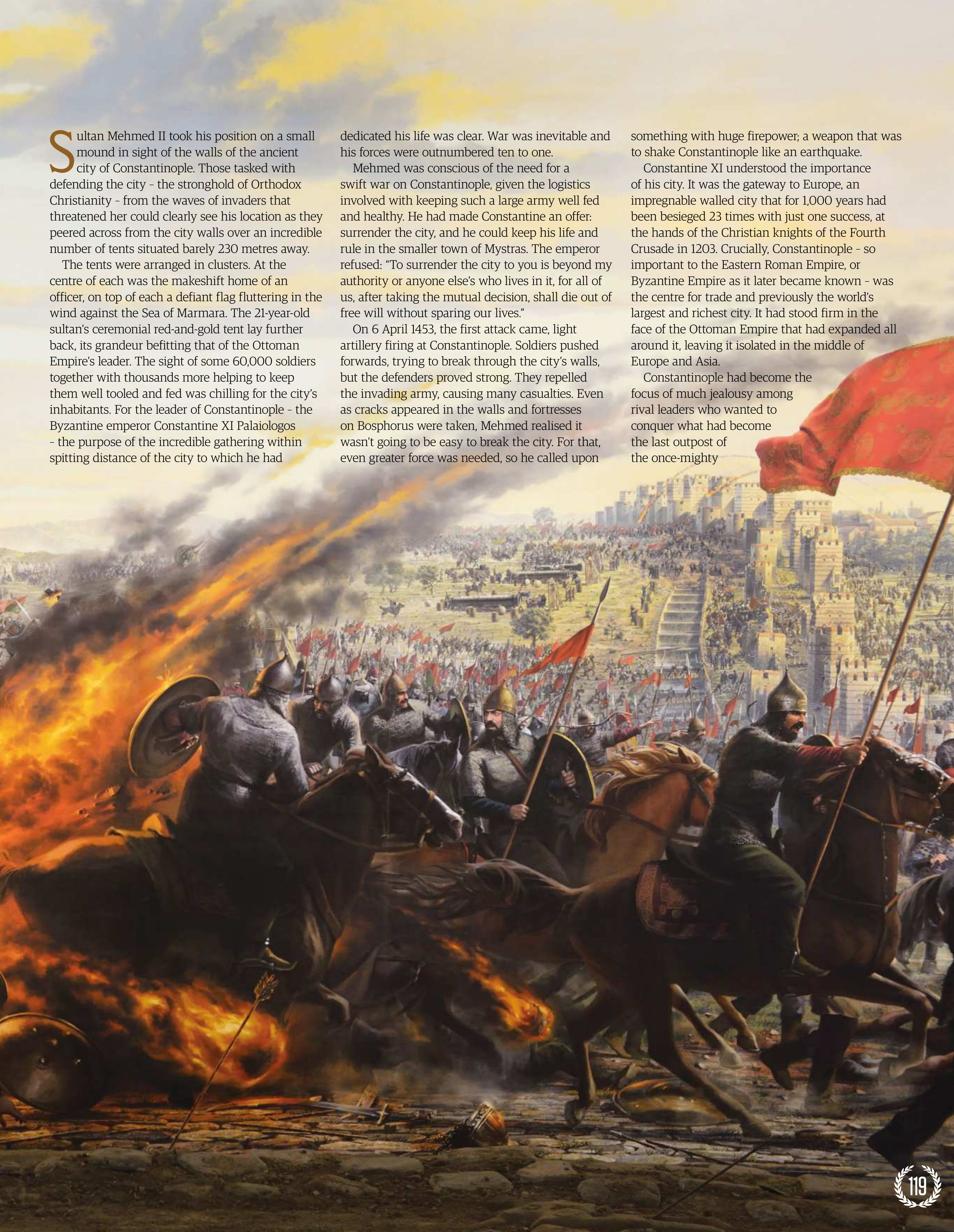
The tents were arranged in clusters. At the centre of each was the makeshift home of an officer, on top of each a defiant flag fluttering in the wind against the Sea of Marmara. The 21-year-old sultan's ceremonial red-and-gold tent lay further back, its grandeur befitting that of the Ottoman Empire's leader. The sight of some 60,000 soldiers together with thousands more helping to keep them well tooled and fed was chilling for the city's inhabitants. For the leader of Constantinople – the Byzantine emperor Constantine XI Palaiologos – the purpose of the incredible gathering within spitting distance of the city to which he had dedicated his life was clear. War was inevitable and his forces were outnumbered ten to one.

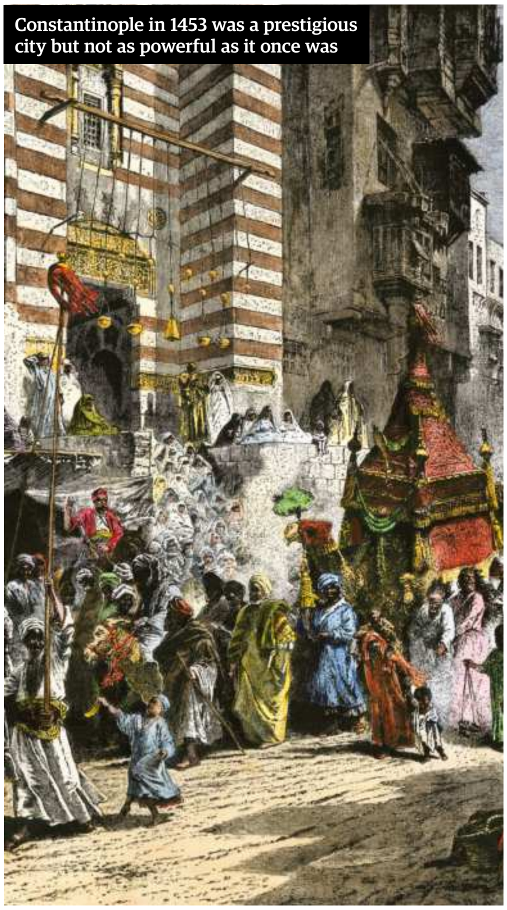
Mehmed was conscious of the need for a swift war on Constantinople, given the logistics involved with keeping such a large army well fed and healthy. He had made Constantine an offer: surrender the city, and he could keep his life and rule in the smaller town of Mystras. The emperor refused: "To surrender the city to you is beyond my authority or anyone else's who lives in it, for all of us, after taking the mutual decision, shall die out of free will without sparing our lives."

On 6 April 1453, the first attack came, light artillery firing at Constantinople. Soldiers pushed forwards, trying to break through the city's walls, but the defenders proved strong. They repelled the invading army, causing many casualties. Even as cracks appeared in the walls and fortresses on Bosphorus were taken, Mehmed realised it wasn't going to be easy to break the city. For that, even greater force was needed, so he called upon something with huge firepower; a weapon that was to shake Constantinople like an earthquake.

Constantine XI understood the importance of his city. It was the gateway to Europe, an impregnable walled city that for 1,000 years had been besieged 23 times with just one success, at the hands of the Christian knights of the Fourth Crusade in 1203. Crucially, Constantinople – so important to the Eastern Roman Empire, or Byzantine Empire as it later became known – was the centre for trade and previously the world's largest and richest city. It had stood firm in the face of the Ottoman Empire that had expanded all around it, leaving it isolated in the middle of Europe and Asia.

Constantinople had become the focus of much jealousy among rival leaders who wanted to conquer what had become the last outpost of the once-mighty




Constantinople in 1453 was a prestigious city but not as powerful as it once was

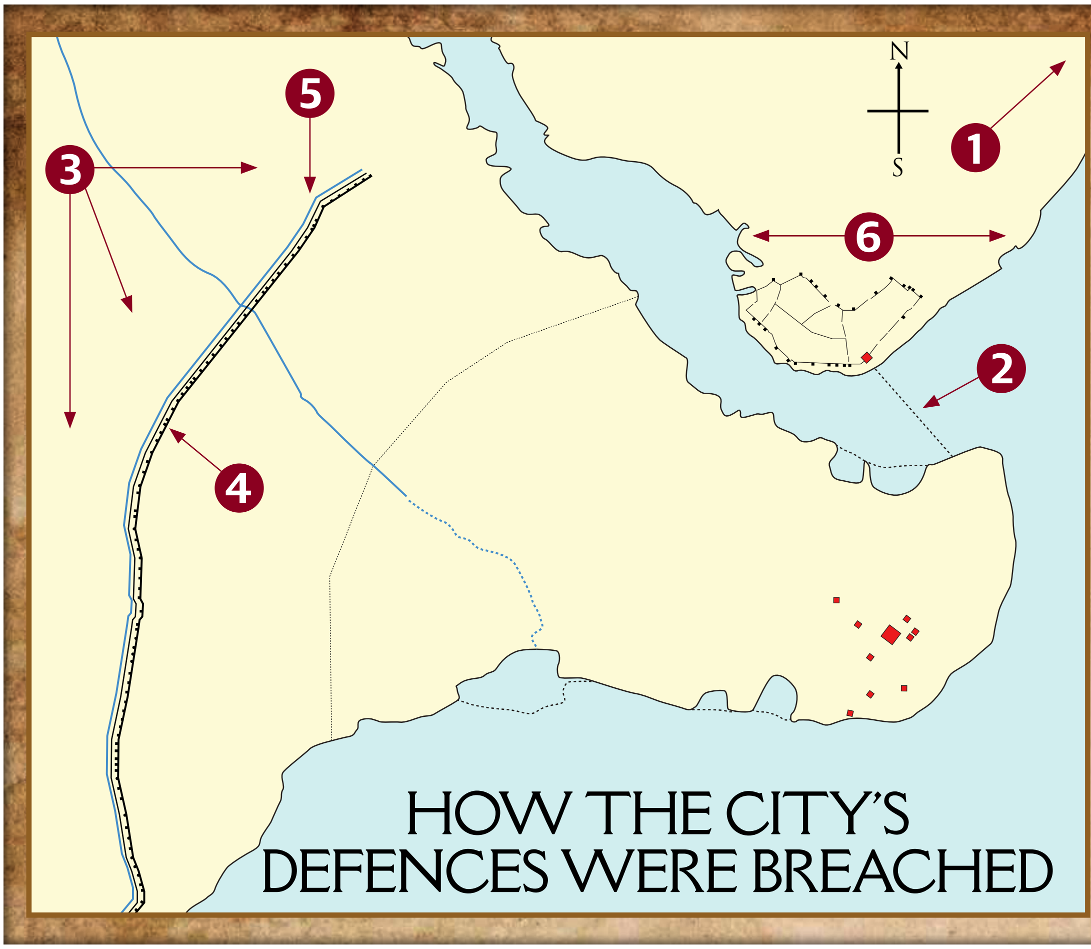
Roman Empire. Followers of Islam had laid siege to Constantinople between 674 and 678, trying again in 717 and 718 in line with the belief that its remaining strength would prevent Islam's reach into Europe. Christian Europe feared the fall of Constantinople, believing it would open the way for Islamic dominance. But even though the city saw off the attempted conquest, the death of Islamic martyrs had helped make it a holy place and the determination to try again in the future burned deep.

Yet for hundreds of years the main threat to Constantinople as the centre for the Orthodox Church had come from Rome, the centre of the Catholic Church. The Fourth Crusade had devastated Constantinople's power and riches, and so by 1453 it was a pale shadow of its former self. By this point, the Byzantine Empire - which at its height had included most of the Mediterranean coast - consisted of Constantinople and a few square miles outside. It might have lost its true power, but its location and history meant it was still desirable. Mehmed wanted it badly.

The sultan was determined to succeed where his predecessors had failed. He had come to power thanks to his father, Murat, who had negotiated a ten-year truce with Christian crusaders intent on invasion. Mehmed had come to hold a desire to be the heir to the Roman Empire and extend his influence. He wanted one faith, one empire and one sovereignty in the world and by 1453, the time was right. Constantine XI had none of the power of those that had gone before him, and the city, with its population of 100,000, was bankrupt. Constantinople had been paying vast sums to the Ottoman Empire as a way of avoiding invasion but this only served to financially cripple it. Now the enemy was camped on its doorstep, ready to unleash hell. The 49-year-old Constantine knew the chances of his small army holding out were slim but he vowed to fight to his last breath.

Constantine had made representations to the pope, knowing that an attack by the Ottoman forces could only be held off for so long. They needed reinforcements from the West to help tackle the threat. A union between the two Churches was celebrated at the end of 1452, but despite the promise of warships, none arrived in the following months and with no help coming, Constantine stepped up the work of repairing and reinforcing the city's walls.

The last outpost of the Roman Empire was ringed by 19 kilometres of perimeter walling, most of it facing the edge of the sea. On the northern side was a chain that had been placed across the mouth of the Golden Horn, the primary inlet leading to a large harbour-like body of water. It prevented enemy ships from sailing past the northern part of Constantinople and was an important part of the city's defences. Constantine's strategy was to put a greater emphasis on the 6.5 kilometres of land-locked perimeter wall, but he



HOW THE CITY'S DEFENCES WERE BREACHED

1. Rumeli Hisari (Fortress of Europe)

Winter 1451: Nicknamed Bozaz Kesen (meaning throat-cutter), Mehmed II ordered the building of a magnificent castle with 7.6-metre-thick walls. Situated at the narrowest point of the Bosphorus strait, its inhabitants used it to cut supplies to Constantinople.

2. The chain

2 April 1453: Although the chain had been constructed centuries earlier, Constantine XI ensured it was strung across the mouth of the Golden Horn in Constantinople as the Ottoman army camped on his doorstep. It prevented enemy ships from entering the inlet.

3. Enemy camp

2 April 1453: The enemy Ottoman Turks, together with a European army, camped outside the city walls. Rhe Europeans were to the north of the river, the Janissaries in the middle protecting Mehmed, and the Anatolian army further down.

4. Theodosian Wall

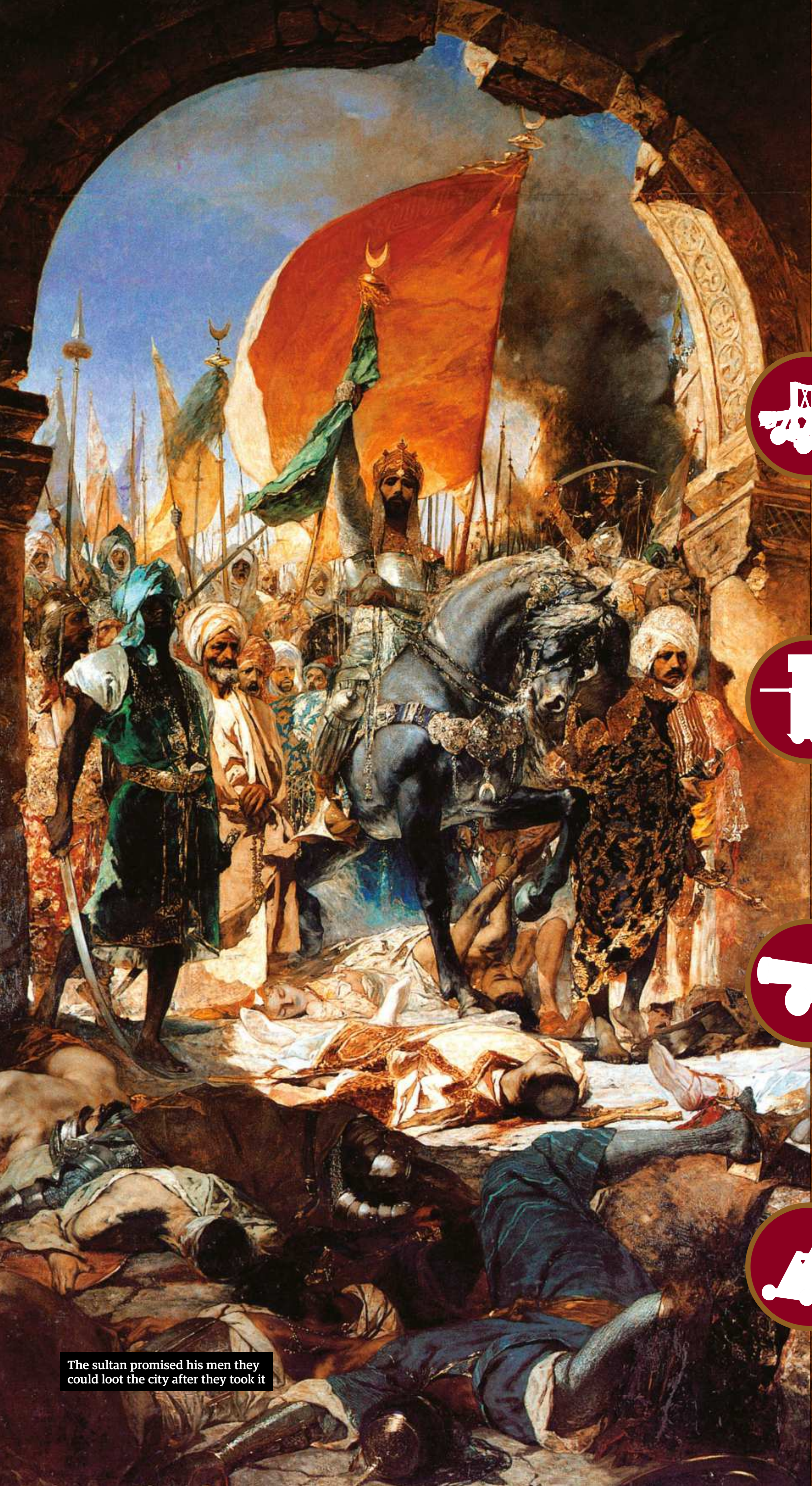
6 April to 29 May 1453: This 6.5-kilometre stretch of land-locked wall was the primary target for the advancing enemy. They struck it with cannon fire and tried to breach it several times before finally succeeding on 29 May 1453, seizing the city.

5. The moat

The moat had been added in the 5th century and it was an extra barrier between any invading army and the city walls. It was around 20 metres wide and seven metres deep. The Ottoman Turks tried desperately to fill it to allow for a safe and easy passage.

6. Bypassing the chain

22 April 1453: With the chain blocking access to the Golden Horn, Mehmed II ordered the ships to be carried over land instead. In the dead of night, they were pulled over difficult ground using log rollers and relaunched into the water, much to Constantine's surprise.



The sultan promised his men they could loot the city after they took it

THE EVOLUTION OF SIEGE WEAPONS

BATTERING RAM

First used: Unknown

Strengths: A part of warfare since ancient history, battering rams have been highly effective in smashing down fortifications. They started as simple heavy logs but swinging mechanisms later came into play.

Weaknesses: Although great at impacting stone and brick, they were next to useless against thicker walls. Soldiers would also have to get up close to cause damage. Gunpowder and cannons replaced this clumsy method.

SIEGE TOWER

First used: 11th century BCE

Strengths: Moveable siege towers allowed soldiers to scale curtain walls since they were of the same size or higher. In later years, the bottom part would be covered to allow for covert work such as filling in moats.

Weaknesses: Since they were made from wood, they were vulnerable to collapse. In Constantinople, the siege towers were set alight by the defenders using Greek fire – a weapon frequently used by the Byzantines in naval battles.

CANNON

First used: 12th century CE

Strengths: Cannons were effective against even the strongest fortifications as the super-cannons utilised in Constantinople showed. Artillery fire was used heavily in World War I and lives on in a modern form today.

Weaknesses: The need to reload them and ensure they are aimed correctly makes them cumbersome. In Constantinople, it would take some three hours to reload the super-cannon and it was a tiring, manual process.

CATAPULT

First used: 4th century BCE

Strengths: Catapults were able to propel missiles over the fortified walls of cities and castles, striking death and fear into the heart of a population. They could also be used to smash the walls with large stones.

Weaknesses: When defences are strong, the effects of catapults can be neutralised. And no matter what type of catapult was used – some were tension drive, others were spoon-like – they were cumbersome to move and position.

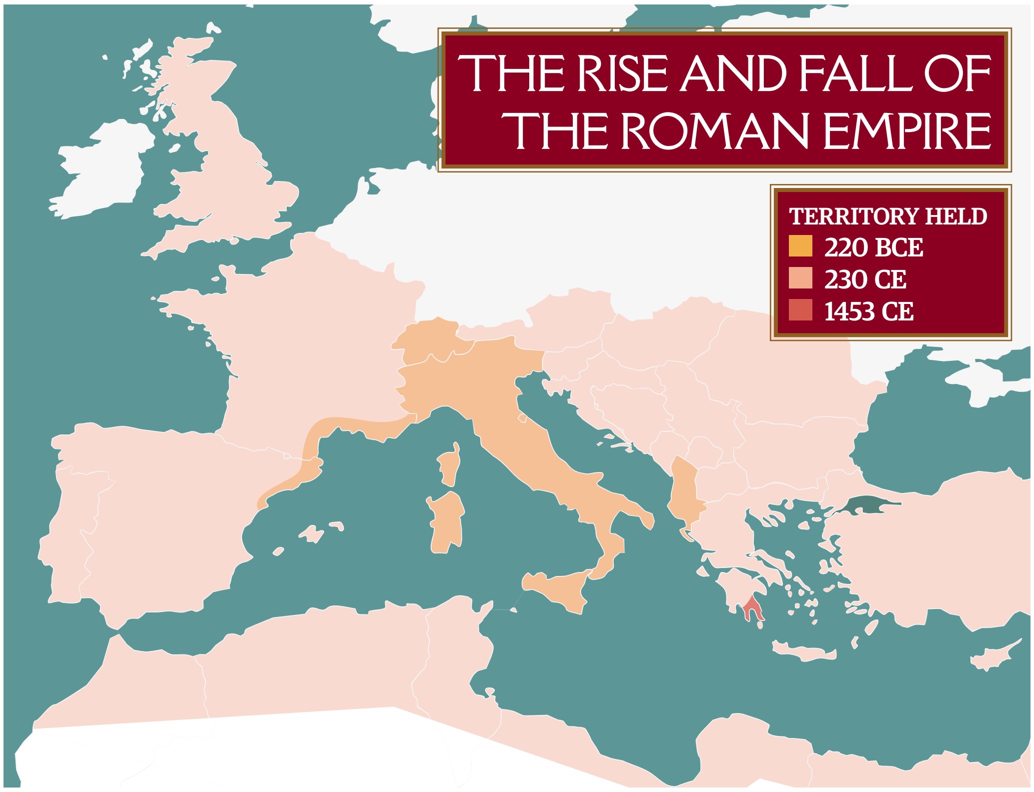
didn't know about the latest weapon about to be unveiled by his enemy.

Mehmed enjoyed the discovery of new things and so was rather taken by a proposal to create a cannon larger than any other that had been built. This, he surmised, would be perfect to smash the famous walls of Constantinople.

Gunpowder had been available since around the 11th century - it appears on the Song dynasty text *Wujing Zongyao* - so its power was not unknown. The Ottomans' new weapon was different, though. It was devised by an engineer called Orban, who had visited Constantinople from the Kingdom of Hungary and was taken on by Constantine to develop new weaponry. The infrequent payments forced him to seek employment with Mehmed and he promised the sultan he could make a weapon large enough to fire a huge stone that would demolish the city's walls.

Orban was given an abundance of money and the materials to build his super cannon. It took him three months to make the giant weapon, the end result being a monster that was 8.2 metres long and capable of hurling a 272-kilogram stone ball over an incredible 1.6 kilometres. When it hit the walls of Constantinople, the shock waves were immense. Constantine's men struggled in the face of the onslaught as it smashed into the stone surroundings, causing parts to crumble to the ground, leaving gaping holes in the city's defences. Their respite came in the three hours it took to reload the cannon - they could use the time to repair the wall with mud and other materials to hand. The defenders draped animal skins over the walls, which, together with the mud, helped to cushion subsequent blows to that area.

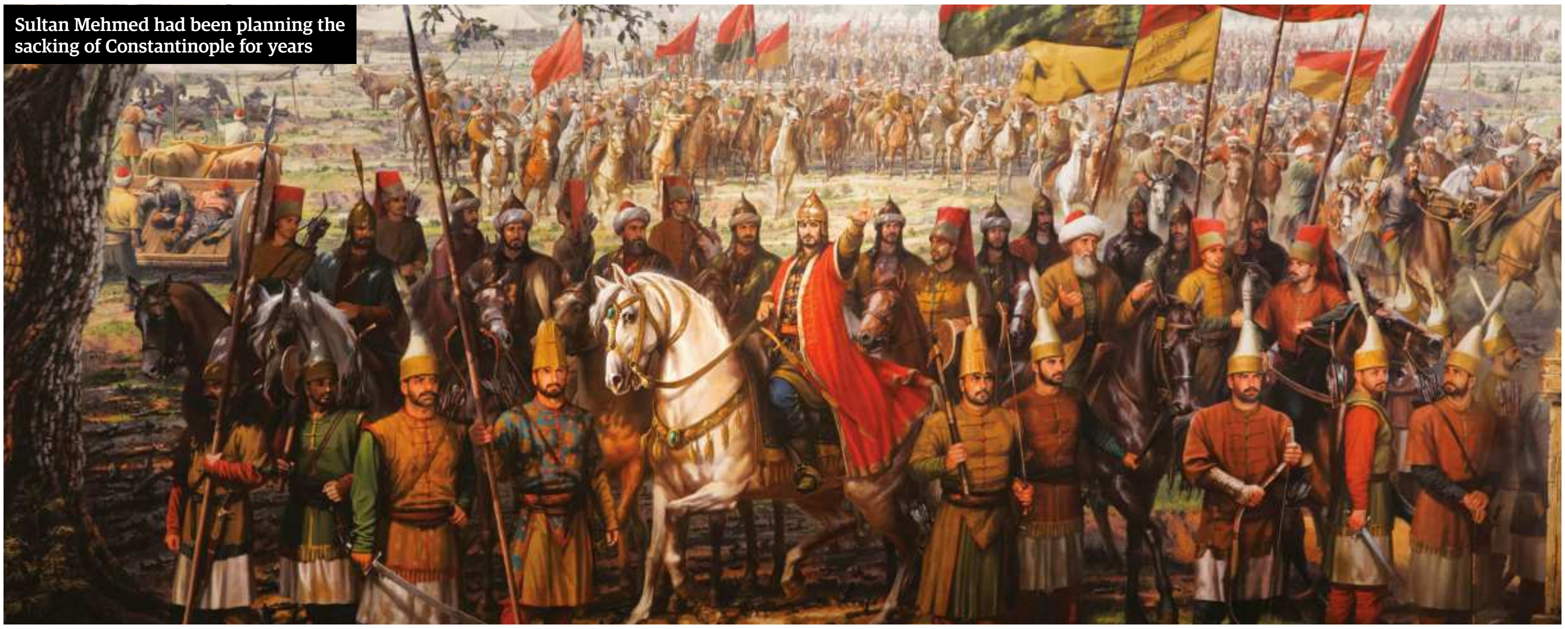
The noise and incredible shaking of the walls and ground as each ball smashed into the city's walls caused as much psychological damage as it did physical. The pounding went on for days. Constantine was helped by Giovanni Giustiniani and his army of 700 professional soldiers from the island of Chiois. Giustiniani was instrumental in keeping the walls repaired and Constantinople somehow continued to hold strong. By now, the battle had raged for 12 days.



> "He promised he could make a weapon large enough to fire a huge stone that would demolish the city's walls"

One of the major aims for Mehmed's army was to fill the moat surrounding the city walls so that access could be quickly gained but Constantine's men emptied them at night. Even so, there had been enough damage and headway for a second stab at taking over Constantinople on 18 April, but this was repelled.

One of the most effective pre-war plans enacted by the Ottomans was the building of a large castle on the European side of Constantinople, close to the city. Finished well in time for the siege, the Ottomans nicknamed it Bogaz Kesen, which



Sultan Mehmed had been planning the sacking of Constantinople for years

WHO WAS THE CITY NAMED AFTER?

The city was named after Constantine the Great, the Roman emperor from 306 to 337. He had battled against Emperor Maxentius for control of the West in 312 and won. It was a victory that allowed him, as the first emperor to convert to Christianity, to lead the way for religious tolerance.

Under Constantine, the empire flourished, eventually being unified in 324. Constantine continued to look east and established New Rome in Byzantium. The Romans renamed this Constantinople in his honour and it came to be the capital of what became known as the Byzantine Empire.

translates as the 'throat cutter'. Taking just four months to complete, it could be used to control sea traffic on the Bosphorus strait. The Ottoman Turks could cut supplies to Constantinople by blasting away at defiant ships trying to sail past, using large cannons situated on the water's edge. The city was dangerously isolated.

But just as the Ottoman Turks had made preparations, so too had Constantinople. The defenders had strung a chain across the mouth of the Golden Horn. By blocking access to the waterway, the defenders were able to prevent an onslaught from that direction. The defenders had proved adept at seeing off the Ottomans' naval advances and there had been close ship-to-ship combat during which the Byzantines emerged victorious. Yet cutting off the Golden Horn meant they could concentrate their efforts on defending the land-lying areas of the wall instead.

The sultan's solution was ingenious. Mehmed looked at the chain and surveyed the land close by. He decided the answer would be to haul the ships over land from the sea to the water cut off by the chain. And so it began. Soldiers and oxen pulled at the ships, sending them over pre-laid rollers greased with animal fat. Scores of ships were hauled over in a mammoth overnight task. Surprised and aghast, the defenders were unsure what to do. The ships were now able to fire at the scantly guarded wall to the side of the Golden Horn. Within hours, great damage was being caused and the victorious Mehmed showed his ruthless side. When a group of defenders managed to escape from one sunken ship, his punishment was to have them impaled.

"Constantine vowed to defend his city to the death"

The high-stakes game of cat and mouse continued, and Mehmed ordered the Ottomans to mine under the city. On 16 May, Christian soldiers heard underground activity and went to investigate. Their discovery of miners put them on high alert and, having sorted the initial problem, they tried to think up effective ways to spot further attempts. John Grant, a Scotsman who had found himself in Constantinople, recommended placing buckets of water around the walls of the city. A ripple on the surface of the water would alert them to possible mining. It worked.

The attacks may have been repelled but the defenders were getting tired and their walls were a mess. On 27 May, Mehmed made the decision to throw everything at the city. Ottoman forces bombarded the walls relentlessly, causing heavy damage. They were fast and furious, giving the defenders little time to make repairs. Mehmed then prepared his men to march forward. They were, he said, not to touch the structure of the city – he wanted Constantinople to remain as intact as possible so that it could form his capital. They could loot and enslave, though. With this promise, the army spent 28 May getting ready, praying, resting and running through their tactics.

Constantine prepared his city, encouraged his soldiers to fight to the last man and vowed to defend his city to the death. There were just 4,000 men left to hold Constantinople – half that at the start of the siege. On 29 May, after a 47-day siege, the invaders surged forward, scaling the walls. They were pushed back by the defenders who knocked away ladders and used hot oil to scald them. Two waves of attack were repelled.

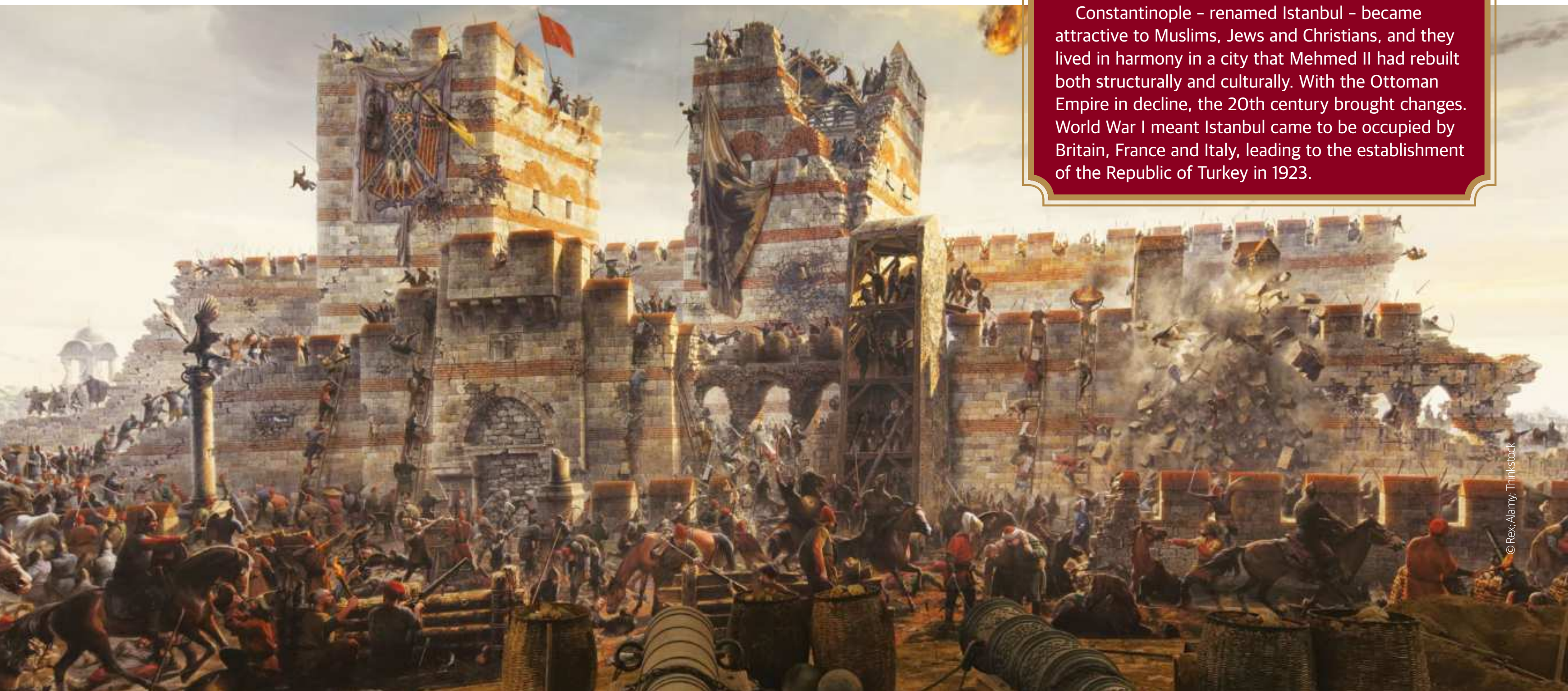
But Mehmed's Janissaries – Christians picked up by the Ottomans as children and trained as fighters – broke through, their elite training enabling them to breech the walls after numerous hours of fighting. There were hand-to-hand battles in the narrow streets of the city. The defenders knew the city were soon overpowered. Screams filled the night air. As Ottoman soldiers poured into Constantinople, the city was overwhelmed.

The Ottomans flung open the great bronze doors of Saint Sophia and massacred large numbers of worshippers. With priests dying by the altar and with a vast number of prisoners being rounded up, the end was upon the city. Their emperor tore off his imperial ornaments so he looked like any normal soldier, saying, "The city is fallen and I am still alive", and charging to his death. The invaders tied up any enemy they didn't slaughter, grabbed women and fought over the most attractive of them. Children were led into slavery and the city was ransacked of what little it had left. After more than 1,000 years of a glorious Constantinople, the last outpost of the Roman Empire was no more.

WHAT HAPPENED NEXT?

Although Christians aimed to reclaim Constantinople after its fall, such ambitions fizzled out in the 16th century. Many of the Byzantine Empire's learned men had left and sought out new inspiration, flooding Europe with teachings and culture, and Constantinople was transformed into an Islamic city.

Constantinople – renamed Istanbul – became attractive to Muslims, Jews and Christians, and they lived in harmony in a city that Mehmed II had rebuilt both structurally and culturally. With the Ottoman Empire in decline, the 20th century brought changes. World War I meant Istanbul came to be occupied by Britain, France and Italy, leading to the establishment of the Republic of Turkey in 1923.



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WHAT IF... ROME NEVER FELL?

EUROPE, 117-PRESENT

Illustration by **Ian Hinley**

JERRY GLOVER

After completing his degree at Manchester University, Jerry Glover became a scriptwriter and television producer before turning to independent historical research with a particular interest in ancient societies in Europe, the Near East and India. He has written dozens of articles for numerous publications, and in June to August 2013 he curated an exhibition in St Albans dedicated to Medieval graffiti, based on his own photographs and research, the first such exhibition held anywhere.

Can we pinpoint a time when the Roman Empire fell?

We're speaking of the Western Empire, which after a long decline symbolically fell in Ravenna in 476. But an enhanced Senate continued to exist for more than a century afterward. The Roman concept of state was continued for almost a millennia, as the Holy Roman Empire and the Western Roman Empire continued to exist 'on paper', but only as a legal formality. Let's also not forget that the Eastern Empire continued until the 15th century. Given all that, it'd be a phenomenal situation if Rome never fell. 'Never' is the key idea here. For a Western Roman Empire still in existence today would have to be so different from the reality of what made it the Roman Empire that we could hardly call it that at all! A surviving Western Empire might well hold vastly disproportionate influence over human affairs everywhere. It would encompass, and indeed define, most if not the whole of Europe, as well as other parts of the world.

How possible is it for Rome not to have fallen; what would have to be different?

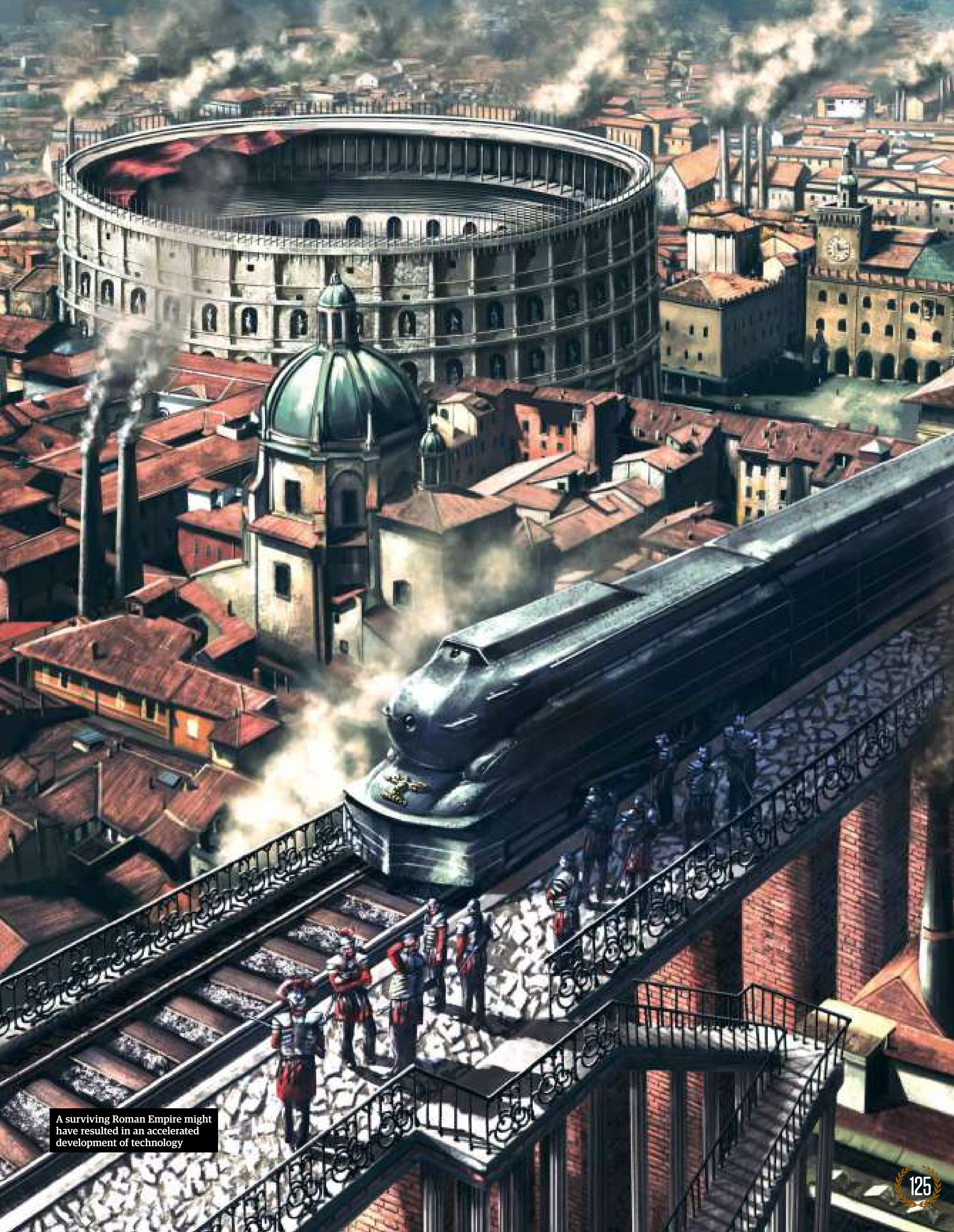
From the end of the 2nd century, levels of trade and prosperity fell, never again achieving the levels of the early Principate. By the mid-3rd century, when the empire split into three competing entities and widespread civil unrest massively disrupted the trade network, the degeneration of imperial finances escalated. The state's inability to pay its troops increased, too.

Essential items such as weapons, clothing and food became part of soldiers' pay, and much trade took place without currency. One response was to debase the currency. In the second half of the 3rd century the silver content of the antonianus collapsed, causing hyperinflation, which had to be dealt with by Aurelian in 271 and 274 by raising taxes and eradicating the bad coinage in Rome and Italy, but not the provinces. To prevent continual currency devaluing, Rome would have needed to grow its silver and gold reserves. Mines in Italy were not large or reliable enough, so instead Rome could stem the amount of silver it exported to India in return for spices, curtailing its taste for luxuries. Difficult! Preferably, they could discover new sources that exist in Central Europe or sub-Saharan Africa, or by voyaging to Mesoamerica where silver and gold is plentiful and fairly easy to reach.

Excellent cartography and astronomy borrowed from Persia is key to making this possible. In the Mesoamerican scenario, the Romans come up against the Maya, sparking conflicts the Romans would be hard-pressed to win in harsh jungles, and greatly outnumbered. Instead, they muster their advantage in technology and international connections to cajole the Mayans into a trade alliance to develop their civilisation – exchange steel, machinery and urban planning for Mayan gold and hardwood. With diplomatic outposts established in Mayan cities, Roman legions, consisting of Mayan warriors as well, march to the gold regions of Peru and California, returning to Rome with spoils that make the treasure of the Temple of Jerusalem look like a prize at a village fête lucky dip.

How would Rome's government be different?

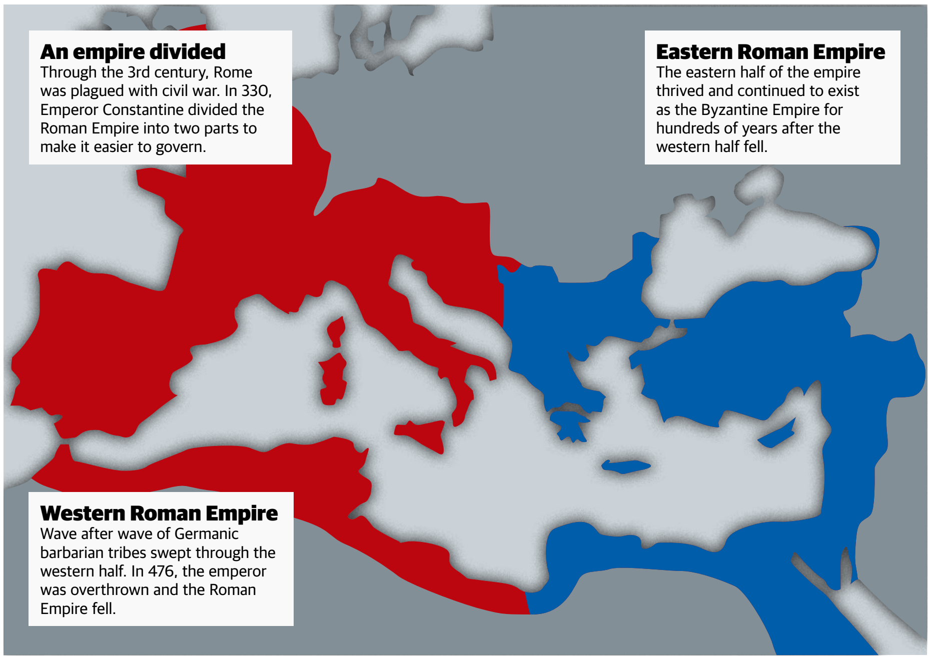
To keep the empire stable, a balance would have to be struck between tight, autocratic rule by an elite oligarchy, intelligent decision-making, and the machinations of prestigious, well-connected individuals. The expensive civil wars that contributed to the collapse could be averted if Rome had reformed the system by which the emperor was selected after the 3rd century, when the senatorial class was marginalised and any connection with the imperial family was sufficient to make a claim. Almost all emperors after that time were army officers or imperial officials, and that stratocracy led to rivals and bloody conflicts. From the mid-3rd century, emperors also wasted time with matters that previously were dealt with by an imperial legate. If he was unwilling to trust anyone else



A surviving Roman Empire might have resulted in an accelerated development of technology to deal with a distant problem it would be neglected, and the trend toward smaller provinces made it even harder to get things done than before.

Diocletian's Tetrarchic system from 293 quartered the empire, each part ruled by a sovereign emperor. But each group selfishly favoured its own aims over the whole, so the system crumbled from near-constant civil wars. With much more radical reform it might have worked if the Tetrarchy reformed into a Supreme Imperial Office comprising more regional co-emperors, who were chosen only from the Senate. And if reform included the chance to become a senator - or any official - on personal merits, not just for being one of the landed classes.

Intelligence and capability also have to carry real political influence, basically an oligarchy of technocrats. Each office is decided by a small closed election, a bit like the way the pope is chosen from a group of cardinals. But the periods of service are fixed, like the president of the United States, so no office gets too much influence over the rest. Only soldiers are allowed to keep their jobs as long as they are performing well, but no general can become emperor. That's very important, as is keeping the army properly paid. It's a system where anyone can become an official, or even emperor. Yet still oligarchal and Roman enough to preserve the ideals that work so well in the empire's favour - conquest, assimilation, expansion. That's the basic theory, anyway.



An empire divided
Through the 3rd century, Rome was plagued with civil war. In 330, Emperor Constantine divided the Roman Empire into two parts to make it easier to govern.

Eastern Roman Empire
The eastern half of the empire thrived and continued to exist as the Byzantine Empire for hundreds of years after the western half fell.

Western Roman Empire
Wave after wave of Germanic barbarian tribes swept through the western half. In 476, the emperor was overthrown and the Roman Empire fell.

How might Rome have progressed beyond the 5th century and onward?

In the 7th century the new religion of Islam galloped out of Arabia, and Muslim armies began a war against both the Romans and the Sassanians, already fighting since the 3rd century. Many factors would have to go into Rome winning the war against this fresh expansion. For one, Rome would need the resources to defend the Middle East, which supposing they still have western Europe and north Africa, and are investing deeply into gaining a foothold in Mesoamerica as I envisage, it is still questionable unless they can make up with the Sassanians. It's a logical step for them to build strong diplomatic relations with other empires; the Hunnic, Sasanian, Rashidun, Umayyad, Mongol, and subsequent empires.

Despite all the negative connotations of being an empire, a surviving, generally non-belligerent Western Roman Empire would in some sense be the model of a well-governed, prosperous, cosmopolitan society, having evolved beyond the strife and economic problems that dogged its early history, exacerbating its actual demise. On the other hand, the cost of this may well be an even more hierarchical and brutal society, with slavery still rooted, and a very harsh law code.

Would the world as a whole be more or less technologically advanced?

In certain areas I suggest it would be a lot more advanced, provided there's no stagnation of scientific enquiry that

HOW WOULD IT BE DIFFERENT?

REAL TIMELINE

Rome's greatest glory
With victorious campaigns in Mesopotamia and Dacia, Trajan achieves the greatest extent of the Roman Empire's territory. The empire's population is around 70 million. **117**

Crisis of the Third Century
Upon Emperor Severus' murder by his own troops, a string of short-term 'barracks emperors' fight, allowing frequent raids from foreign tribes. By 258 the empire splits into three states: Roman, Gallic and Palmyreme. **235-284**

Diarchy and Tetrarchy
Diocletian appoints officer Maximian as a second emperor with equal power. In 293 two more army officers are appointed junior Caesars with supreme authority, creating the Tetrarchy. Diocletian reforms taxation and coinage systems, but cannot enforce prices. **286-313**

Foundation of the Eastern Empire
The city of Byzantium becomes the new imperial seat of the Eastern Empire, with Constantine naming it Constantinople. The empire maintains control of the eastern provinces, regaining territory in Italy, Sicily, southern Spain and North Africa in the 6th century. **330**

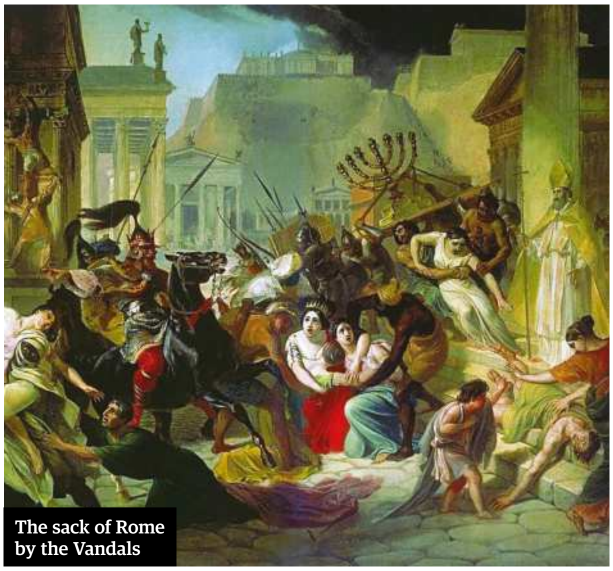
Waves of invasion
The Tervingi, a tribe of Goths under pressure from Hun tribes, are allowed into Roman territory. After their leader is killed, they rebel, invade Italy and sack Rome before securing lands in Aquitaine and Gaul. They found a kingdom in former Roman Iberia (Portugal and Spain). **376**

Battle of Adrianople
Emperor Valens heeds the advice of the cautious Western general Richomer not to attack, instead of the hawkish Eastern general Sebastian who urges the order. Valens negotiates, stalling while reinforcements arrive, and wins the battle.
9 August 378

REAL TIMELINE

Accelerating the decline
The deaths of four strong military leaders, Theodosius in 395, Stilicho in 408, Constantius III in 421 and Aetius in 451, are crucial in greatly accelerating the collapse of the Western Empire.
395-451

ALTERNATIVE TIMELINE


The sack of Rome by the Vandals

A depiction of Pilate's Forum

happened in Europe across Late Antiquity. Instead of the intelligentsia putting so much effort into Christian religious doctrine and hoarding ancient knowledge in closed monasteries, there is a freer circulation of information that allows engineering to innovate much faster. Steel was known to the Romans, and sooner or later they must have realised that making tools from it instead of just weapons would increase agricultural productivity, and architecture would develop faster for its use in tools, cranes and girders. The principle of steam power was already known to the Ancient Greeks. If the Romans had cottoned onto the possibilities of that, combined with iron and steel, it's feasible they could have invented the steam engine, hence locomotives, revolutionising long-distance transport, a rail network spanning the empire. The Industrial Revolution could have started 1,000 years earlier, marking the beginning of the end for the slave system.

This isn't necessarily for everyone's benefit. More powerful engines of war, including firearms, might well have encouraged emperors to expand the empire's boundaries, bigger wars and extra pressure on state finances and reductions in the overall standard of living. But if the empire is not to fall, ambitions of conquest must be held in check, maintaining the delicate balance of international relations.

Are there any key events that could have stemmed Rome's fall if they went differently?

One that stands out is the Battle of Adrianople in 378 when Roman forces of the Eastern Empire lost some 10,000 lives to the Visigoths under Fritigern. This gave the Goths free rein in Thrace and Dacia, a major instigator of the process that led to the fall of the Western Empire. The blame for this calamity rests with Emperor Valens. During negotiations, premature attack broke out from the Roman side, and Valens allowed this to force his hand, ordering an attack that spiralled into a disaster, including his own death. If Valens had kept his head, who knows? Instead of being the 'Last True Roman' as he's been called, he might have been the greatest of them all.

Loss of Britain
Following the removal of troops in northern and western Britain, Constantine's officials are finally expelled by British chieftains. In 410 they appeal to Emperor Honorius, who urges them to "fend for themselves". **407-408**

First sack of Rome
In their third attempt, Visigoths under Alaric ransack the city, killing and torturing citizens to reveal their hidden valuables. The Goths continue to ravage southern Italy. Roman refugees flee to North Africa. **August 410**

A crucial blow
The Vandals move on from Spain into North Africa, securing Carthage, then Sicily. This further weakens the state's revenue and ability to field an army, encouraging further Goth attacks that regain most areas of the Western Empire. **439-441**

Fall of the Western Empire
King Odoacer deposes Emperor Romulus Augustus and sends the imperial regalia to the emperor of the Eastern Empire at Constantinople. **4 September 476**

Vandals repelled
Majoran uses an enhanced fleet of 65 ships (not 40) to win against the Vandals at the Battle of Cartagena. He retakes Sicily, gradually reversing the Vandal usurpation of North Africa. Rome expands into sub-Saharan Africa. **461-475**

Black Death averted
Grain ships carrying bubonic plague from Egypt sink in a storm before reaching Constantinople. The averted Plague of Justinian allows the Eastern Empire to populate faster by a factor of two. **541-542**

Invention and expansion
The first outing of Minerva's Arrow, a steam engine that runs on rails, is a centrepiece of a year-long festival of art and technology in Rome. The rail network gradually expands to all frontiers. **681-962**

Return of the Black Death
From one trade caravan on the Silk Road, plague reaches Europe and then a ship bound for Mesoamerica. Half the empire's population and those of its neighbours, around 290 million, perish. **1346-73**

No more war?
The Goths are assimilated, preventing their plunder in Thrace. With British territory stabilised, Rome trains on Scandinavia and the Ukraine, forming a frontier across the Baltic states. The ensuing massive cost entails harsh taxes, provoking empire-wide rioting. **378-415**

The Second Pax Romana
After three years of deliberation by the new Supreme Consilium, reforms are announced to forever eradicate corruption. With the finances rebalanced, imperial wealth starts to surge once again. **475-635**

Holy Land Wars
A Roman-Axumite alliance prevents Islamic expansion into North Africa, but loses Mesopotamia to the caliphate powers. Rome loses control of Jerusalem. **635-700s**

New World alliances
After exploration and conflict in Mesoamerica, Rome establishes relations with the Mayans, helping prevent the civilisation's collapse. In Peru they extract tribute from the Chavín culture. In California they enslave Native Americans. **650-1251**

The HyperRenaissance
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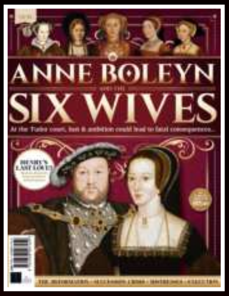
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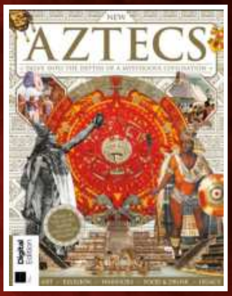

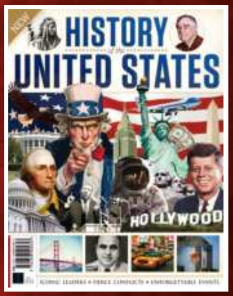
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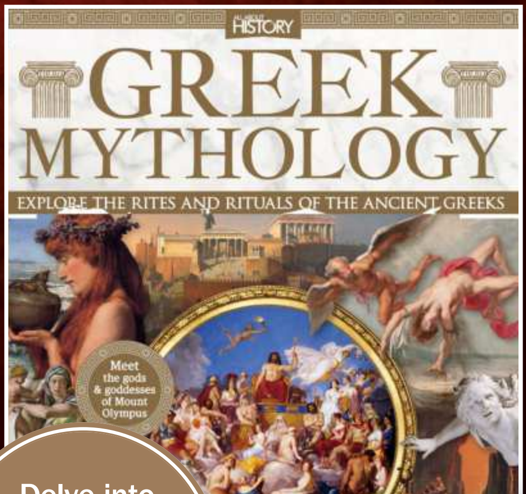
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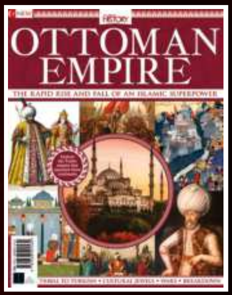
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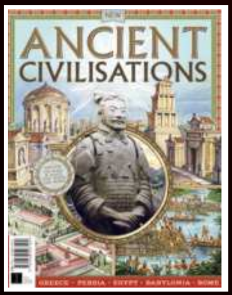
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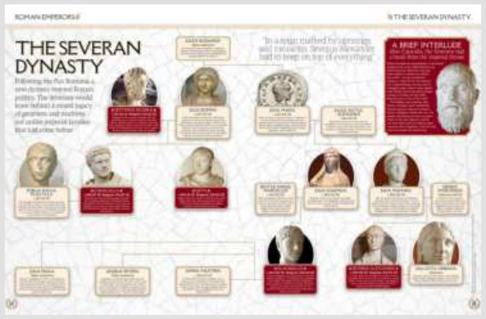

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THE SEVERAN DYNASTY

THE SEVERAN DYNASTY

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BLOODY BYZANTINE EMPERORS

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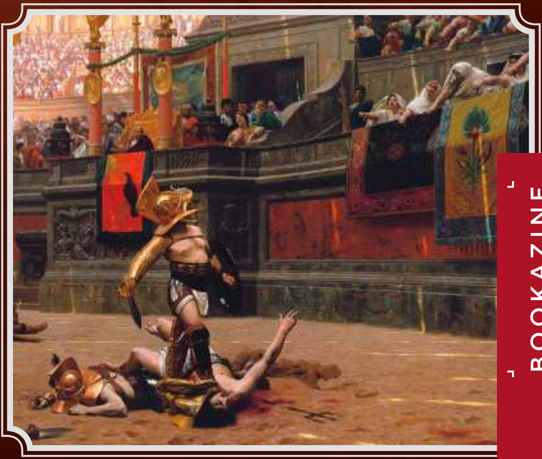

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